

Housekeeping

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Housekeeping

by [FKAHerSweetness](#)

Summary

Marriage is a creature living separate from its components. Yet it requires attention, tolerance and care. Have you seen it? Could you recognize its deep wounds - and which one of you inflicted them? And are they ready to heal? What do you really know about this illusory animal?

Notes

Oh, there you are. Seems you're right on time. You don't really need to ask. Sit down, hurry up. Listen... I have a story to tell you.

Misunderstandings

"Sorry," Will says, inching the door closed between them. "I'm not interested in Jesus."

He cannot close it for the wrist in the way. Held out strong, sure. He thinks he might shut it on her, if she were not a woman. As she continues to speak, he thinks he might do it despite her gender.

"—misunderstanding," she is saying, beaming through square white teeth. The slight heated breeze tosses yellow strands of her hair about. The brochure in her hand limpens, bends to Will's stomach. "This isn't about Jesus; this is the Neighborhood Association. I'm Kade Prurnell, the president."

Will looks at her. He feels his own face pull to a frown.

She continues to smile. Points down to the right, near the bowled top of the cul-de-sac. "That's my house, in the middle. Please feel free to come by with any questions. And of course, attend meetings. All the information is inside." She shakes the flapping and glossed thing at him now. "Right in here."

One more inch shut. "Thanks," Will says, "but really, I'm not interested in joining any groups. I just—"

"Pardon me—"

"Listen—"

"Sir—"

"Just—"

She groans aloud and somehow manages to retain her smile, which startles Will. She says, hurriedly, "*Where* is your husband?"

Will pauses and, as if on instinct, allows the door to fall as open as it was upon Kade's arrival to his doorstep. This opens the vista behind her: the sandcrete step stones that lead from the sidewalk and mailbox. Those which she traveled on high-heels, in business-blue skirt. The other side of the street and the houses identical to this, to that, to the one over there, and from which the door opens — a man pops his head out, shuffles down his driveway to capture a bereft morning paper. He is staring at Will and Kade, lingering for a moment, then returns. The door shutting echoes in the late morning.

Will's eyes refocus on Kade. Then narrow. "What does that mean?" he asks.

"Nothing— it's just, perhaps I could better explain it to him. Is he at work?"

Kade is batting a thousand. But Will does not plan on letting her know. He figures the band upon his finger has given him away, or maybe she – like the man across the street – has simply been watching. Will snatches the brochure from her thin fingers and holds it gently at his side.

"Thank you, Mrs. Prurnell."

"That's Miss."

"Whatever."

"So, you don't have any questions?"

"Nope," Will says, and smiles, and slams the door in her face. He can hear her startled grunt on the other side of the door and through the clouded glass panel, can see her figure persisting. She turns for the step stones, then glances back once. "Please do let him know," she calls. Will bristles further, clenching the brochure in hand. At length, she leaves; the clicking of heels in her wake.

Will stands still within the cavernous foyer; he watches the door as if Kade might return, bang again as she had moments prior. But she is gone. Perhaps already back at the house she indicated further down the row. The light heat that touched his face from the sun, the rangy scent of freshly-shorn lawns, and the bright light caught in her hair, all of these are gone, and Will is left alone with this brochure.

Will swallows. He folds the thing in half, again, and once more, and tears it to small, beautifully laminated pieces. They fall to the marbled floor, and he walks back into the depths of the house.

*

The movers arrive late – 1:05 PM. It is barely five minutes but Will has spent the small chunk of time counting the seconds, saying *Mississippi* one syllable at a time, and thus coming up short. When the truck pulls into the smoothly paved driveway, and Will goes out to greet them, he realizes that he has no idea what to say, and he wishes they had been later. He is disagreeable to the emptiness of the house but even more so to expediting.

The men, of which there are four, look hot and tired. They stand before Will with the back of the truck opened up. One, a thick and hairy man of Will's height, says, "You got anywhere special in mind for all these?"

Will sighs. He opens his mouth to speak and, in his periphery, catches sight of the house to the immediate left of his own. Out of the front door walks a man of ashen hair; his gait is long, even, and he travels his own step stones to his own brick round mailbox. Will's eyes follow him down and back, and he does not look over. From this distance, Will cannot see much, and the cab of the moving truck obstructs what little there is. Through the windows of the cab, he sees the deep sun upon the man's forearms, as he shuts the front doors behind him.

"Sir?"

Will jolts. He looks at the movers. "No," he says. "Anywhere is fine."

As they set to task, traveling in and out of the back of the truck, and into the house – Will has had to prop open both of the double doors to allow for couches, loveseats – Will finds his one instruction was not enough. The men shuffle up to him at intervals with questions, beleaguered complaints.

"This stuff is marked *kitchen*; is it okay to put it in the front room?"

"Where do you want this statue?"

"Which room is the master bedroom?"

"My shoe kind of scuffed the floor. Is that all right?"

No, anywhere, second floor and last on the left, I don't care.

Their footsteps lead over the bits of brochure in the foyer. One of the men nearly slides on them, rights himself, continues on. Will peers into the back of the truck; he doesn't remember packing up this much in Boston. Where has it come from? He sees his own scrawled hand in black marker upon the boxes. *Misc, Kitchen, His, Mine*. Yet the memories in which he did these things elude him; as if they happened in some other dimension separated from his own by the thinnest of veneers. The sun is very bright. He leaves the truck to the men and returns to the cool cave of the house.

It is almost 3 PM by the time they are done, and the house looks to be the smallest bit more furnished than it was before. Will has thought it a thousand times over since first having photographs of the place shown to him: It is too big. Much more furniture will have to be purchased to not have it resemble some kind of aseptic museum. The high ceilings, the vastness of floors that bend to eyesight like horizon. The gilt scrollwork upon the columns in the foyer. Small brown hills of boxes amidst the glossed valleys. It stands before Will in cold taunt. The movers have left behind their toil and the scant scent of sweat. Their truck leaving the dip of Sol Terrace and roving down into Baltimore proper.

Will leans back against the front doors. He looks at the brochure bits, the scuff along the floor. The ring on his finger. He exhales.

*

The task before him is foreign and daunting, yet he must try.

He rips open a box from the kitchen and finds a paring knife. From there, he goes about the house, slicing boxes from their duct bindings. He thinks it like setting free slaves or prisoners of war, long held bereft of freedom or human kindness: once liberated, they sit still and unknowing of what to do or where to go.

Will the Merciful, Will thinks, and goes along each room cutting open boxes. The only room that looks to have any sort of rhyme or reason to it is the master bedroom, which is

befitted with the downy king-size bed. Platform sable. Two nightstands on either side, and boxes around them like attendants. Will frees those as well. He looks aside to the great wall of windows, the sun pouring in.

He goes to the sill and realizes, looking at the neighboring home, that the windows are all placed exactly the same on these sides of the houses. Thus, this bedroom window looks directly into the bedroom of that house. Will squints. Their curtains are open, allowing in sun by choice. Will's windows have no curtains yet; only basswood slated blinds, spaced unevenly. He makes a mental note that he will have to acquire curtains, and quickly.

The prisoners are free of bonds. He knows he should set to unpacking properly, but convinces himself he has earned a shower in the hollow luxury of the master bathroom.

This is one of the things he loved about the home on sight:

Above the marbled twin sinks is a grand, silver-edged mirror that reflects to one standing in it all that is behind them and to either sides. Will's hair is but wild dark curls and his eyes are tired. Yet he takes his time in front of it; languidly removes his t-shirt, unties the belt from his waist. From outside, he hears a car down the street. It is still mid-afternoon and he will be alone for hours yet.

Standing bare upon the cold tile, he sighs. Places his hands in the mass of his hair, pushes it back, up, out of his eyes. He tugs at his cheeks to pull taut the skin beneath his eyes. Rubs at the stubble upon his chin.

The shower is squared and surrounded by frosted glass. He stays in until the water turns tepid, and all the while, he attempts not to cry. He thinks he has enough fortitude to avoid it; and knows that giving in to weak urges will only slow his pace when he does return to his tasks.

"You did this to yourself," he mumbles into his wet hands.

The words ring true and not without a degree of self-loathing. It is unequivocally his fault, yet can he say he is not in turn, in some way, blessed by this strange outcome? He imagined something like this when he was but in his early twenties, drifting through days heavy with the oppressive and oft-sickening aromas of Arabica and Robusta, the ever-present hum of conversation, machines whirring and acoustic music sifting down from overhead speakers. He imagined a house much like this, wide and deep and too big but all he deserved, all he could want. He imagined not having to work, to slough through days as one dead. Though delicious things ill-gotten taste off. Burnt. Or too much salt.

Will turns the water off when he is drenched in cold. He shivers stepping onto a towel strewn to the floor. Sees himself through the dissipating steam on the mirror. Cheeks red, lips pink. The sodden line of hair below his navel.

He squints, and sees beyond himself. Into the mirror, into the window that is behind him at the left of the shower. And over the ravine of grass, to the bathroom window of the neighboring house in which stands a stiff shadow, unmoving and shaped unmistakably like a person.

Will gasps and whirls around, nearly slipping on wet tile. He bends, grabs the towel from the floor and stuffs it in front of him as he flails to the window. Throwing the sash up with one hand, he sticks his head out into the flower-scented day.

"Hey! Hey, you! Fucking— what's wrong with you?"

The shadow does not move, and Will grits his teeth. A droplet of water falls from his nose down into the rosebushes below.

"I can *see* you," Will shouts. "You're not slick!"

Still, nothing. Then: the shadow moves the slightest bit, closer to the window, and Will can see him, as clearly as he saw him through the windows of the moving truck.

Will bristles immediately, his eyes widening. He cries, "That's it!" and turns, wrapping the towel around himself securely as he thunders down the hardwood stairs, and into the foyer. His feet still minorly wet, he steps into the brochure bits on his way out and one catches to his heel. Front door standing open behind, he rushes out onto the lawn, the lush green grass beneath his feet. The heat of the driveway, around the front of his Mercedes, to the No Man's Land of grass betwixt his house and the neighbor's. Before Will can venture further, the door to the house opens, and the man is produced, he who went to the mailbox earlier in the day.

At approaching close range, Will notices: the crop of his hair, the wine-colored flecks in his dark eyes. The motion of his body as he walks across the grass, the roll of his shoulders, glide of his legs. The button-up rolled to his elbows. Fabric straining at his chest and the countenance with which he regards Will – the sliding of which, from placid to loose and rounded.

Will's toes curl in the grass. He clenches one fist at his side, the other continues to grip at his towel. He feels something strange beneath the flats of his feet. Is the earth quaking? These small tremors travel from trampled foliage to the top of Will's head, stopping to fray briefly in his stomach on the way up.

Will shakes these things away.

"The hell is your problem?" he asks when they stand a foot apart. "Do you really think that's appropriate?"

"Forgive me," says the man, his lips moving with a full accent. Will narrows his eyes at this, wondering if he plans to play the foreigner card. "I was simply looking out of the window. I happened to—"

"That's the worst lie I ever heard."

"Yet it isn't a lie."

"How long were you watching me?"

"I did not see much," he says and lowers his voice in a placating way.

Will frowns. "That's not what I asked!" He pauses. *Much*. Will tightens his grip on the towel and looks down, aside, into the grass. A beetle wanders from under cover of a sugar maple leaf, off towards Will's house. When his gaze rises slightly, he sees at the man's left hand a simple wedding band, similar to Will's own. He groans. "Oh, Jesus."

The man releases a soft sigh, and Will bristles further. There is a sound about it as if he is attempting to calm a riotous child, and as such has figured he can only weather the storm until reason settles. But Will is not the unreasonable one on this patch of lawn.

"Listen, uh—"

"Hannibal," he supplies. He catches Will's gaze again, and Will watches the way his lips move as he says it: "Hannibal Lecter. And you are?"

"I am *moving*," Will shouts, a threat which has no real meaning or force behind it. "I hate these stupid houses and their windows. Whose idea was this?"

"A housing developer, presumably."

Will opens his mouth. Shuts it.

"It seems there's been a misunderstanding," says Hannibal Lecter.

"No, there really hasn't." Will pauses. "I'm calling the police."

"Because I looked out of my window?"

Will puffs up, his mouth scrunched into one jagged, small line. He hears something that is not summer ambiance and turns his head back; all along the curve of the cul-de-sac are doors opened, faces popping out to stare down in their direction. The man from earlier, across the street, he who's brown face is obscured in the shadow of sugar maples in his front yard. And further at the head of it all, pinch-faced Kade Prurnell whose expression Will cannot tell but he imagines it to be judgmental. Will feels all of himself heat, and he takes one foot back towards his house, his open door.

Flies are probably going in.

He says, not looking back at Hannibal, "I'm going to invest in curtains. Thick ones. So you can get your jollies elsewhere."

As he walks away, ignoring the multitude of gazes upon him from every direction, he hears Hannibal once more: "Then, I take it you are not moving after all."

Will looks back at him after he has reached his door. Hannibal stands motionless, the sun illuminating the ornate designs on his shirt. The thin creases of his slacks. The smooth curvature of his cheekbones. Will rolls his eyes and shuts the door.

He has spent far too much time awry. The only thing that matters is that he shows his capability in this area. Will, once again, sets to task; this time with a frantic hurry in his step.

The sun outside dips low over the verdure and rooftops similar to his own. Rose and lilac mist the sky, and stars blink to wake in the east. Along the sidewalks are post lamps that burn softly in the oncoming dusk.

Will decides that in the time he has left, he cannot possibly unpack all of the boxes littered throughout the house. As such, he prioritizes. The master bedroom, the kitchen and the living room are sure bets. It sounds doable in his head, but as he begins in the master bedroom, taking out carefully folded and boxed bedding to make the bed, he finds himself looking aside towards the wide window, through which he can see Hannibal Lecter's house and what must be his own master bedroom. He and his spouse.

As Will rushes about the bedroom, he looks up again to find that familiar shadow in the room. Will's ears begin to redden and he feels a thudding heat in his stomach.

"Because I looked out of my window?"

It takes a moment, but Will calms himself. Returns to rummaging in boxes and tells himself the man has a right to be in his own rooms. He tries not to think on the spectacle he has made of himself and instead wonders what color drapes would suit the house. He wonders if that is his alone to consider.

From the bedroom to the living room, which is vast and sparsely furnished. Will sits on the suede couch and digs through things. Places a ceramic statue on an end table nearest the couch, then rethinks it. Places it on the mahogany coffee table. Picks it up. He goes to one of the empty back rooms of the house, one which is small and he cannot think of what to make with it.

He looks to the side and finds, once more, Hannibal. Standing in the room equivalent in his own house, which is softly lit. There is a wide and thickly-packed bookshelf at the far end, where Hannibal travels to replace one in his hand. Hannibal looks to turn, and Will does so first at such a speed he gets a sharp pain in his neck. Rubbing it, he departs.

It is nearing 7 PM when Will is depositing the last of the flatware and utensils into the kitchen cabinets and drawers respectively. The long counters and isle in the middle of the floor are black granite and smooth to the touch. The sink a stainless steel basin over which is a vista window which looks into the identical kitchen across the grassy ravine. Will sighs raggedly. He is going to get tired very quickly of this unchanging view.

Hannibal is there, his back turned to the window. Will squints. On the isle surrounding him are vegetables which Will cannot make out for the distance. There is a large copper pot on the stove, and clouds of pale steam rise from it. At the sight, Will's stomach makes a sound of longing and his eyes widen.

He's forgotten about dinner.

What to do? He had not thought to go to the store all throughout the day; has been running himself on some strange liquidized sustenance that occurs when dismay and determination are mixed. He realizes he is ravenous and hurries to find his cell phone.

*

By the time the delivery boy arrives, Will thinks he might expire from hunger. As he is paying the young man in front of him, and taking into his possession one large pizza – the box holding which is lukewarm – he sees headlights rolling quietly down the street. The darkness obscures the view of the vehicle and for a moment Will thinks it is a black Escalade, and his heart seizes minutely.

Over the top of the delivery boy's cap, Will sees subsequently that it is in fact a silver Audi, and it pulls in directly beside the Bentley next door. Will watches as the car slowly shuts off, the lights dim and diminish. From the driver's side exits a blonde woman, wrapped tightly in a dark blue dress. Her heels click along her driveway, and before she can finagle house keys from her purse, the front door opens for her. Will sees Hannibal's profile, and then it disappears with the shut of the door.

Will snorts lightly and thinks, *Hope you know your husband's a pervert, lady.*

When he looks back to who stands before his own front door, he finds the delivery boy staring at him empty-eyed. Will feels the heft of the pizza in his hand, the temperature, and on these grounds feels he is shorn of any tipping duties. He shuts the door.

Scarcely has he placed the pizza box on the isle in the center of the kitchen does he hear another car arriving. This is another false alarm, he sees, peering through one of the street-facing windows. It is a Lexus and bypasses the house for one of those in the dip of the street.

Will finds himself staring down at the bits of the brochure on the foyer floor. He frowns and begins to pick them up. At the island in the kitchen, he works with a roll of clear tape and his own struggling mind to piece it back together. A few of the scraps are lost; to the movers' shoes, to Will's own wet feet fresh from the shower. To the gulf of ether. By the time he is done, the front door is opening and Will turns around in enough time to see Frederick step into the house. He shuts the door and looks up, around, as if evaluating, though there is little to see in the foyer.

Will comes to him softly, a smile upon his face.

"Hey," he says. "How'd it go?"

Frederick is eyeing the high ceilings. He cranes his neck back into the living room, then turns fully to Will. Deep circles under his eyes, matching Will's. Wrinkles at the corners of his grey suit. "Oh, you know. Insane people. They're all the same, really."

"Even there?"

"Even there."

"Well, I ordered pizza."

Frederick tries to look pleased; Will can see it's forced. *It's okay*, he tells himself. *I'll get the hang of it.*

He tries to think of it like witchery. Tasks completed parallel ingredients for a potent brew. Enough of these things, the right things, and the spell will be completed. Enough arranging done, enough dinners cooked, enough proof that Will is properly repentant and all will be well. The scales of dubiety will fall from Frederick's eyes. Will can walk properly and not as if upon eggshells. The newly-wedded bliss from seven years' prior will re-descend like a plumeria-scented haze.

Presto.

"Here you go," Will says, handing the taped and fractured brochure to Frederick in the kitchen. "You'll probably get it better than I do."

Décor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first thing that hits Frederick in the morning is blinding sunlight. The wide windows in the master bedroom – hailed on the realty website as providing a calming sunrise panorama – are little more than a problem to be dealt with. Too, upon readying himself for bed the night prior, Frederick took overwhelming notice of the odd placement of their windows which look into that of their leftside neighbors.

"That could be a problem," he mumbled to Will who stood on the other side of the bed in striped boxers. "I mean, they could accuse us of looking in on them."

Will deposited himself between the sheets. "Yeah," he said.

If there is anything good to be said of the house, it is that they will never be in want of natural lighting. As far as the rest of it goes, beyond being situated in a beautifully upscale suburb offset from Baltimore, there is not yet much to see. The furniture from their old house does not fill it the least bit. The walls stark, the rooms echo his words back to him. There is a scuff upon the floor which Frederick is sure was not there at the time of purchase. All this he was too tired to say last night – the long day situating himself as Administrator of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane wringing him of any real ability to complain.

And he could see the anxiousness within Will upon Frederick's arrival. It permeated the house – overpowering, even, that potent scent of fresh paint.

In the morning, Frederick wakes first for his closeness to the wide windows. His vision adjusts and he rolls onto his other side, facing into the vastness of the bed and the small space between he and still-sleeping Will. The calm plains of his face, and the boyishness of which has not faded even at thirty. Frederick gazes upon him for long moments before moving from the bed, and in his wake, rousing Will.

There is naught but cold pizza for breakfast. Will looks at Frederick across the marbled island sheepishly.

"I'll go to the store today," he says, half-smiling. "And order curtains. And, uh, maybe some—" He looks to consider. "Artwork?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

Upon Frederick's departure from the house, he and Will do not say much to each other. He can feel the other's unease: his light footsteps, the downcast of his eyes. At the open door, Frederick turns and looks at Will fully, standing in boxers and a white shirt amidst the cavernous house. Frederick sighs.

"Will. Are you— do you think you might like me to hire a maid again?"

Will's eyes shock wide. "What? Of course not!"

"I'm just saying. This is a big house. It's a lot of work, and you haven't really..."

There is the sound of another door opening and at once, both Frederick and Will turn to the side to see their leftside neighbor's house. The front door stands open, and a blonde woman walks down the driveway to the Lexus waiting beside the Bentley. Just visible from the still-open door is the flash of hair, the wingtip of a shoe. A thick forearm. The door shuts, and Frederick looks to see Will still staring, his countenance scrunched and unsettled.

"Will?"

Will turns back to Frederick with firelight in his eyes. "I can do it myself," he says. "I don't need any help."

Frederick thinks of the NA brochure sitting on the island – the one haphazardly taped and missing pieces.

"Okay," he says. He leans in and kisses Will, half on the mouth. Will kisses back, grabs at Frederick's lapels in some attempt for more but Frederick pulls back. He sees in Will's face some hesitation and then soft smiling. In their front yard, in a holly, one lark calls to another. Frederick looks at the rings on their fingers. He kisses Will again. As he walks down the drive, soon to leave down the street where their blonde neighbor has already gone, he hears from behind:

"Have a good day."

Frederick returns the sentiment, starts the Escalade, and departs.

*

Will is trying, that anyone can see. Yet Frederick does not know if he is to take this on good faith of honest effort and an endeavor to move forward or if it is some broken remnant of an apology. It is not the sort of thing one directly asks. Therefore, his only course is to assess the situation as it develops.

If Will is truly contrite, it will reveal itself. Until then, Frederick must too take on new roles. The foremost of which is his new position within the city's renown mental hospital.

It is expansive and hollow, not unlike the new house. Though this is to be filled with patients and not furniture and artwork. Frederick has seen them: he has walked along the darkened corridors beneath the building, looking into the cells. There are three levels of patient housing, the topmost of which is the ground floor of the building. The first basement floor, then the second. The second being for the most violent of patients; those, when Frederick meets with them, must be chained.

Werner Mett is from the ground floor. He is unchained, and sits in his blue jumpsuit, two yards from Frederick in the patient conference room. It is a small room just across the

hall from Frederick's new and lush office. Two windows, knotted pine end tables. A vase with a plastic hyacinth inside, and two almost-comfortable chairs. It is far from any room Frederick has had patient appointments in prior. Nothing he would have used in his old practice. Patients have a hard time opening up if they are not swaddled in luxury like royal infants.

But patients held by order of state, not insurance, are hardly the same.

"Do you remember?" Werner is saying. "Do you remember that we were best friends? And that you depended on me." He is nearing fifty and is in tremors – just his fingertips. His eyes are brown, and bring out the discoloration of his face. Old acne scars. "And that I was all you had when you were poor. When your mother kicked you out." He killed his own mother with kitchen shears two years prior, says his file. "Tell me you haven't forgotten me."

Frederick looks at the notes in his lap; those given by the old administration. Frederick must go through each patient and reconsider their diagnoses. His assistant, Bailey, another remnant from the elder administration, has said it is also to familiarize himself with the patients. He does not think there is much point.

"Mr. Mett," Frederick says. He uses this voice when he is speaking with clientele: calm, slightly removed. In the past two months, he has taken to using it with Will. "Do you know why you are here? In this room? At this moment?"

Werner looks at him. "Because they keep giving me things I don't want. And I keep refusing them. So I'm here."

Frederick taps his pen against the pad. He says, "How many things do they give you?"

There is a pause. Werner's eyes clear, from mud-brown to hazel, and his expression clouds until he cries.

As he is gently escorted from the room by two orderlies, he turns back to Frederick still sitting and says through thick tears: "No one's ever asked me that."

Frederick figured this out in graduate school: proper psychiatry is a load of dumb luck. How could he have known asking such an inane question would mean so much to Werner? He couldn't. He shot in the dark, in a lackadaisical way, and hit some unnamed target. Hitting targets with criminally insane and incarcerated patients could only get one so far; no amount of psychological breakthroughs is going to bring Werner Mett's aging mother back from the dead. The coroner probably had one hell of a time fixing her face for the wake. He might not have even tried, and simply insisted on one closed-casket.

These things have passed, and thus, cannot be thought of as any endgame of therapy. Rehabilitation? There will be none. Whatever Incident heralded their capture – for some, their surrender – and prolonged captivity is no longer consequential. All that lies before the patients is their unending time spent in the facility and, perhaps too, how they would like to face this mortar eternity.

The same, then, must be true for Frederick's own inciting Incident.

How will he look back on it?

How will he look forward?

With poise, he decides. With poise.

*

Will starts the day with an astonishing amount of ambition. It deteriorates quite quickly, and from there he is running on fumes. He did not sleep well; the windows bothered him and he kept thinking Hannibal Lecter was staring at him from across the way. Numerous times in the night, Will looked over his sleeping husband's shoulder just to peer into the other house's window, but it was shaded with closed curtains. It was something, at least.

Will begins buying madly on the internet: curtains, in all sizes, furniture he thinks has no real functionality, artwork – because he promised to – and because he cannot decide on a color scheme for the house, he buys in an array of colors. After clicking through the various pages asking if he is truly sure of his purchases, and is sent confirmation emails, he is overcome with buyer's remorse. What made him think a cyan armchair would go with a magenta ottoman? Why did he buy a painting of a prize-winning racehorse? And upon re-surveying the pictures of his purchases, he realizes that the teal vase he bought is shaped, indisputably, like a uterus, and he cannot stand the thought of looking at it every day.

What is he going to tell Frederick?

He doesn't think about it; they won't arrive for a few days, and until then, Will plans to busy himself with other pursuits. He takes a long trip to the grocery store and as he leaves the house, he finds that Hannibal Lecter is walking out of his own house simultaneously.

Will blushes hotly and races to his Mercedes, nearly diving into the driver's seat and locking the doors. He glares over the leather seats, through the passenger window, to find that Hannibal is checking his mailbox, and made no motion to come to Will's side of the lawn. Will peels out of the driveway before his own embarrassment kills him.

When he returns, the trunk full of items that Will heard rolling around at corner-turns, Hannibal is standing on his front lawn, speaking with the man from across the street. Will remembers him from yesterday, as he and the entirety of the cul-de-sac watched Will's nearly naked confrontation as if it were pay-per-view.

There is no hope of going unnoticed. As Will takes bags into his hands, he hears, "Hey!" and looks up from under thick curls to see the man's brown hand raised in greeting. Hannibal is looking over as well, his cool gaze as exacting from afar as it is at close-range.

Will sighs. "Hey," he calls, raising a hand with a bag in it. He hopes he sounds unfriendly.

"Need a hand?" He begins to come over.

Will shakes his head wildly, and slams the trunk shut with his elbow. He is gone in seconds and into the cool of the house, the door shut behind him. Dropping the groceries on the foyer floor, he races to the kitchen, where one of the large windows faces to the front yards. Ducking a bit, he peers to see the man looking puzzled, then returning to Hannibal. He says something, and Will cannot make it out. Hannibal responds, and they both laugh.

They're talking about me, Will thinks, burning with indignation.

In a second, the other man leaves, crossing the shaded street to his own identical house. Hannibal watches him go, then turns, and his eyes meet Will's before Will drops himself to the floor. He doesn't think he's made it in time. He counts to thirty, *Mississippis* in between, and then rises again. Hannibal is nowhere to be found.

Will gasps and bolts up, through the rooms of the house that are on the left side. He looks into all of the windows available and cannot find Hannibal in any of them. Some he checks twice. When he decides the man has disappeared to the other side of the house, he sees him, once again, in the kitchen.

Will watches him for a second, the man's back turned to Will. There is no way to know how long Will looks, and when he realizes it has certainly been more than a moment, he turns to collect his groceries on the foyer floor.

The curtains cannot arrive soon enough.

*

Over a dinner of undercooked spaghetti, Frederick explains to Will what the NA is. Will isn't sure he gets it. He isn't concentrating – he can see on Frederick's face that he's displeased with the food. But what does he expect from Will? He's rarely ever cooked anything for the two of them; in fact, he thinks rarely might be generous. He's never done it. Georgette, their last maid, had that taken care of. That, and the rest of the house.

Will had never thought to watch her. When would he have had the time?

He worked idly at the coffee shop, despite never needing to after marrying, and he went out. He supposes, in some way, he never thought they would leave the house, and by extension, leave Georgette. Will still remembers her the week prior, when Frederick suddenly told her they would be moving states away, when he gave her a corpulent check that equaled to almost a half-year's salary. She thanked them both in that French accent, eyes downcast, for she had undoubtedly heard the shouting the night prior from their bedroom. She undoubtedly heard glass shatter and if she did not hear it, then she certainly saw it on the hardwood floor the next morning.

Thinking back on her accent makes Will remember Hannibal's. And he looks, furtively, to the side out of the kitchen window, to see Hannibal's lit up and a shadow ghosting through, though whose – he cannot be sure. Frederick is home, and thus Hannibal's wife is home.

Will crunches his spaghetti. "Does– does everyone on the street belong to it?"

"I suppose they don't have to, but it would be imprudent."

"So, we're just in it now. That's just a thing we do. We go to meetings and pay money."

The correct wording would be Frederick – *Frederick* pays money. But Will does not bother correcting himself.

"Right." Frederick looks at the brochure at his plate-side. "And they tend to order within the neighborhood. Housing regulation."

"Such as?"

"Well, the bushes, for one."

"What, they trim the bushes? That Kade lady?"

"No, she makes sure everyone has their bushes trimmed to the proper height and width." He waves a hand distractedly. "That's why they're all the same. We'll have to hire a gardener." He looks over at Hannibal's house. "We should ask our neighbors who they use."

Will feels himself blush and looks away. "I don't like our neighbors."

"Really? You've met them?"

Will says something that is halfway between uh huh and yeah.

Frederick raises a light-colored eyebrow, inviting Will to go on.

"They're weird."

"She seems nice enough."

"Well, I meant the guy."

"What's weird about him?" He takes their plates to the sink. "I haven't seen him."

Will rushes over and nearly shoves Frederick out of the way. "I'll do them," he says, pushing the faucet to gush. Frederick relents, walking away. Will thinks he is dropping the subject, which is just fine with Will. He would not want to explain it anyway – how could he? Will knows Frederick is in a place of extreme misgivings. And for this, Will cannot blame him. As such, it would be prudent not to heap shady happenings atop an already off-kilter pile.

"Ask about the gardener, if you get a chance," he calls from another room.

Will frowns into the suds. He pretends not to have heard.

Over the next three days, packages come to the house. They arrive in small boxes, medium sized ones as well that Will struggles with. For the more expensive items, men come to load them into the house and this time, unlike with the movers, Will takes initiative and directs them.

"And where do you want this one?" he is asked, as one man and another hold between them an absolutely giant painting of a bay horse standing in competition regalia; the scenery behind him is a plain field with pines dotted at the far corners. Blue sky eternal above.

Will sighs.

He can't figure out where to put the uterus vase. He almost tries to pawn it off on one of the delivery men, but then thinks it would come across in a bad way. He walks around the house with it for a bit, then decides to put it in the back corner room – furthest from the front of the house. He has yet to fully incorporate this room into his vision of the house at large. Furtively, he looks through the window to see into the same room in Hannibal's house. It has been turned into something of a library room or study, judging from the large wall of books and soft lighting that can be found there. Will wonders if Hannibal was in charge of that, or if they hired a decorator. Frowning, Will places the uterus on a small table, and leaves the room.

Each day, Will attempts cooking. He looks up recipes online, realizes he doesn't have some ingredient he needs half-way through cooking, and when it is finished it is barely edible. Frederick seems to be understanding; or at the very least, he does not mention any dissatisfaction. But Will knows it is there, scrawled upon his face.

On Friday afternoon, a vast order of curtains arrives. Will remembers ordering a few different sizes and colors; he does not remember ordering this many. Upon opening all of the boxes, he feels inundated with fabric. Thick, sheer, silk, cotton. He tries to put one up in the bedroom, fails spectacularly, and abandons the project.

He'll just have to help out with some stuff, Will thinks morosely.

It is nearing sunset and the house is flooded with orange light. Will walks along the floors to the back of the house where there is a lattice door leading out to the backyard. He has briefly walked here before, to see their expansive dell hemmed by a thick brace of trees that runs along the ends of all the houses in Sol Terrace. On the other side, far into the summer-thick foliage, is another cul-de-sac, their sister neighborhood, Luna Terrace.

The air outside is heavy with the scent of flowers, of grass. Will walks onto the slate tile patio, which is bare but the one black metal bench bolted into the ground. To either side of the house corners are rosebushes, squared and neat, and beyond that are the other houses. None of the homes here, Will notices, have fences. This only adds to troubling notions of tom-peepery, which hikes up in Will as he notices, sitting on his own identical bench one house over, Hannibal Lecter in the setting sun, looking down calmly into a book.

Will's first reaction is to bolt. He makes to, then stalls, continuing to sit. He should not run from his own property – he is well within his rights to sit here, and Hannibal Lecter had best keep to his own side if he knows what is good for him.

Will eyes him for a long moment. He cannot make out the book in his hands. The orange light soaking into the patio, and too, Will's face, begins to purple. To blue. As the sun fades over the high rise of the trees, the world seems to quiet. The hues of green in the grass deepen. Will's gaze softens as he looks to his own lawn, and the fireflies that rise from the ground, blinking on and off lazily. The one-note chirps of crickets. The thicket of trees at the back so dense that Will could believe there is no other cul-de-sac beyond there at all. Just some endless, nameless forest.

Will idly looks aside again and finds that Hannibal has closed his book and is staring at him.

Their porch lights blink to burn in tandem.

Will huffs and looks away quickly, his nose in the air. He turns his body away as well, to further show his disinterest. In a moment, perhaps two, he unlocks himself and glances back over his shoulder. Hannibal is still looking, gazing, and is smiling; the shadows birthed from the porch light angle his face, pronounce the curve of his lips.

"Jesus," Will mutters, his entire face burning. He rubs the heel of one hand against the cool metal of the bench. Sighs. At length, he stands and makes his way languidly from the patio and into the grass. Comes to the side of the yard, at the space where, would this be a sensible place, the fence might stand. He makes a beckoning motion towards Hannibal.

Hannibal, of all things, looks amused. Or perhaps smug. He raises an eyebrow, takes his book in one hand and comes to meet Will, standing a foot apart from him, as they had that first day. Will looks into the man's eyes, then the part of his lips. The thought strikes him: the last time he was in front of this man, he was in naught but a towel, and this brings a shiver deep into the base of his spine.

How could he have done such a thing?

He will have to pretend it never happened.

"So, I, uh—" Will looks up, to the side, anywhere but at that strange expression Hannibal wears. Almost blank, but pierced by the most focused of attentions. "I was looking at your lawn. I mean, all your flowers. Well, I— I mean, we were wondering what gardener you have. You guys, I mean."

Hannibal smiles. "Everyone has the same gardener. They will attend your flowers as well."

"Oh." That was easy.

"It should have been in your brochure."

It probably was – in the missing pieces.

Will shrugs it off. "Thanks," he says and makes to walk away.

"Regretful I have not yet properly welcomed you to the neighborhood," Hannibal says, and Will pauses.

"No need. I'm fully welcomed."

"I wanted to apologize again about our misunderstanding before," he says.

Is that what he's still calling it? Will is not going to argue. He would rather sweep it under the rug. He waves a hand hurriedly. "It's—" Fine? It's not fine. "It's whatever. I mean, it's not entirely your fault anyway. I'd like to meet the ditz who designed this place. Just to complain about the poor views."

Hannibal hums good-naturedly. "Unfortunate. My own view has lately grown in beauty."

Will looks at Hannibal, slightly aghast. He feels such, though his outward reaction is to chew his bottom lip as if it were bubblegum. He looks down at the book in Hannibal's hand and can make out now the title along the straight spine: *Call It Sleep*. The author's name is obscured by the man's fingers. By his gold ring.

Hannibal redraws his attention: "I did not catch your name."

"That's because I didn't throw it." Will rolls his shoulders back. "It's on my mailbox, if you haven't looked already."

"It only says Chilton."

Will blanches. "You mean you really looked?"

Hannibal eyes him calmly.

Will releases a sound he's never before made; it is affronted and only slightly lewd. He turns on his heel. "I have to go start dinner."

"As do I," Hannibal says, though he makes no move to leave. Will does not linger, and soon finds himself back in the quiet dark of his house. He resists watching for how long Hannibal stands where he was left. By the time Will is half-way through some recipe for which he is missing oregano, he looks up and sees Hannibal in his own kitchen – chopping with a smooth, slow motion, the muscles of his back working against the strain of his shirt. Will is drawn away from the sight by nicking his finger.

*

It has been about two months since the last time, and on this one facet Frederick does take the lion's share of the blame.

He would *like* to. He thinks it might even help. But when he sees Will's body – as he does this Friday night; Will getting into bed in naught but blue boxers – all he can see are strange markings along his skin. Red, fervent, runic. They are dull at first and then glow like brands fanned to bursting as Will moves closer. As Will's skin slides across the stark white

sheets, his mouth moving into Frederick's ear. Fingertips grazing lightly over Frederick's chest. The marks look like handprints.

It is because of these delusions that Frederick knows he is not yet ready to resume their sexual relationship. It is childish, he knows. Yet he cannot bring himself to do it. He takes Will's hand gently, maneuvers it away from himself. Kisses Will goodnight.

Will looks at him. Says goodnight, and then turns over.

Is Frederick doing this to torture Will? As revenge – passive-aggressive though it may be?

He would like to think not; it is hard on him too, though he knows it is not yet the same. Will must feel punished. And, too, he has always had a wildly spiked libido, something Frederick has sometimes not been able to keep up with. Yes, even upon their first meeting, eight years prior, it was abundantly clear. Sex drips from Will like sweat. He cannot help it, and perhaps would not help it even if he could.

As Frederick walked into an off-Common Starbucks, enveloped by the warmth and burnt-coffee scent, he shook his closing umbrella and saw Will standing behind the counter. In green apron and cap, tendril-like curls clouding his eyes. He looked bored and agitated. Frederick thinks he must have fallen in love right away. Or at the very least, lust, though lust has never been the least of it.

He ordered a latte and Will did not seem to take any special notice of him. Too, Frederick was uncertain of the boy's age. The youth of his face shocking. Frederick was only just thirty, new at his practice, and nervous about the idea of all the attractive university students in the Boston area. From the back corner of the seating section, Frederick stole looks at Will.

Eighteen?

At least.

Just before closing, Frederick timed his approach so that Will would be caught alone; the female baristas in the back, cleaning, the clanking of utensils and flatware. Will pursed his mouth, listened to Frederick's somewhat stumbling inquiry as to whether Will was free sometime that week.

Will eyed him up and down. His grey Armani suit, his gold watch. Frederick felt acutely aware of the small height difference between them. Will smiled and said, "I'm free now."

Frederick kept thinking to himself, *This is great, but I won't get much farther*. He thought that as Will climbed into his car the first night. And, again, he thought it thirty minutes later when Will bid him to park on a desolate side street, and bent his dark haired head over Frederick's lap. And the next night: when Will demanded to be taken to Frederick's apartment, and he dragged Frederick down in the front room. Told Frederick to fuck him, and during, made tiny breathless noises that Frederick has never forgotten.

Will was sweaty, and nipped at Frederick in his particular ludic way on the hardwood floor. Frederick looked at him fully: the tangle of his curls, his crystalline green eyes. His wet mouth and the pronounced curve of his backside where Frederick's hand rested.

This is great, he thought, but I won't get much farther.

Frederick looks at Will now. In bed, eight years older, with glowing runes upon his body. Curled up and sleeping.

Should I count my blessings? Frederick thinks. For getting this far?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone commenting, you keep me motivated!

Allowances

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Kade Prurnell's house is, in terms of layout, exactly like their own. Will wonders if all the houses in Sol Terrace are such. He expects so.

Kade Prurnell's house is, in terms of design, much better looking than their own. Will glances at his husband beside him on the deep-cushioned maroon sofa, and wonders if Frederick notices this. He expects so.

But Frederick does not say anything to echo this obvious sentiment; indeed not, he sits placidly sipping at a glass of chardonnay. Kade pauses in front of Will now, offering him a thin-fluted glass as well. Will eyes outside, at the approaching dusk. He thinks it is suitably late enough and takes the glass, nodding thanks. He does not meet her eyes; upon arriving here, seemingly in the middle of the pack of guests, Kade looked to Will with thinly-veiled distaste and then to Frederick, crowing, "Oh, *you* must be Dr. Chilton. Please, please, come in."

Will thinks if he had not been in Frederick's company, he would have stuck his tongue out at her.

Presently, the drinks have all been passed out. There are squared white plates upon the coffee table in the center of the living room – filled with prosciutto strips curled around fat figs, and garlic-stuffed olives and some kind of caviar with toast points. In the various seating around the table – loveseats, recliners, ornate cushions on the floor – are people whose faces Will has seen passing his house, in cars or on small jogs. The sensation for most is some kind of déjà vu, though the man sitting opposite him on the loveseat with his wife is most recognizable. He lives across from Will and has been seen oft speaking to Hannibal. In passing, Will hears that he is the chief of the Baltimore Metropolitan Police, Jack Crawford.

From the time of entering Kade's house, and seeing some of his neighbors already in attendance, Will felt a creeping sense of dread. This meeting of the Neighborhood Association would, invariably, bring all included together under this one sorely duplicated roof. As such, Hannibal Lecter and his wife would also be included. With every knock on the door subsequently, as Kade went to greet more members, Will froze in place on the couch. Eyed over at Frederick speaking sedately with a black-haired woman who introduced herself as Beverly Katz.

Will knows his husband. And in light of the events of recent weeks, Will knows that meeting their next-door neighbor would not be conducive to any settlement between them. It would roil Frederick to no end, for, as Will is not unaware: Hannibal is distractingly handsome.

Will is not out of tune to these sorts of things. Certainly not. Nor is Frederick. And at least for now, Will would prefer if the two of them be kept separate. If Will is to have any

chance at all of getting laid in the near future, it must be so.

He eyes Frederick again as Kade finally announces the meeting must begin, with or without absentee members. Will lets his hand graze Frederick's upon the cushion, his fingertips rubbing light circles upon the back of the man's hand. Frederick eyes over at him, gives a tepid smile.

Will bites his lower lip. It's something, at least.

Kade sits across from them on the wider couch by Jack and his wife, Phyllis. Clinks her glass with a fork to call attention which was unneeded as everyone has been silent and staring at her for a moment.

"I'd like to welcome our newest neighbors," she says, raising her glass to Will and Frederick. "Dr. Chilton and his lovely husband."

Will feels himself bristle.

She continues: "I'm sure they will be a great addition to our community."

Everyone looks at them, raises their glasses in tandem. Will sips his placidly, and tries not to believe they are thinking of him in his towel.

Beverly, on Frederick's other side, nods accordingly. Says, "They'll probably be a lot more fun than the stiffes who used to live there."

Kade eyes her. "We should not speak ill of the moved."

Beverly groans.

"The home is quite lovely," says Frederick. He looks around at the interior. "All of them are, it seems."

"And we strive to keep it that way." Kade looks almost too proud. There is a notebook and binder resting in the plush carpet at her feet. She bends to pick them up, setting her glass upon a coaster. Will notices all the coasters are marked in mauve cursive: KP. As she begins to pass around sheets of paper, Will waits for his and stares down at it. Kade says, "Here are the topics we'll be going over this meeting, and I've left some time at the end for extraneous questions, comments, and further announcements."

Will thinks, *Oh my god*.

She continues: "At least, I think there's time. I should never wait for Bedelia and Hannibal; they always throw us off schedule."

A red-head sitting upon a cushion says, "They're probably busy."

"It's Saturday," Kade stresses. "Who's busy on a Saturday?"

Beverly looks at Frederick and Will with a collusive eye-roll. She mutters: "Anyone with a life."

Kade has heard it. "Thank goodness that's no one *here*."

"*Anyway*," Jack says, making a rolling motion with his hand.

"Right, right." Kade straightens her paper. The first topic she addresses is the Yard of the Summer competition. Will thinks about going into the kitchen and putting his head in the oven. He has never heard such nonsensical speaking in his life – and horridly, he thinks, *Is this what I am destined for? Is this what is expected of me?*

As the meeting wears on–

"Okay, but why aren't sunflowers allowed in our gardens?"

"Because it obstructs the windows, Freddie; we shouldn't have to go over this every summer."

–Will finds himself feeling, astoundingly, miffed. He keeps looking out of the front window, from which, he can nearly see every house in the cul-de-sac. His included, and just barely, Hannibal's. Why has he not come? Is he really busy? If this sort of triviality is expected of Will, then it should be expected of Hannibal, as he looks to be in Will's position.

Inly, Will counts back on his fingers. He has some packages arriving on Monday. One of which is the book *Call It Sleep* by Henry Roth. Will is simply curious–

"On the subject of that oak tree on the Katz' front lawn..."

"I told you, I'm *not* cutting it down."

"Beverly, be reasonable. It's unsightly."

"Can she at least trim it? Those branches are hanging in my yard."

"Brian, if you don't can it–"

"Honestly, you won't even miss it."

"That's not for you to say!"

–as to what a man like that has time to read. Will would be remiss in not taking cues from others. Indeed, even this house he sits in, surrounded by bickering and throat-clearing. He looks around idly. Kade's taste in decor is not overly poor, but Will finds it too countryside for his own tastes. And he knows Frederick to be a man of minimalism. Will cranes his neck. No uterus vases.

Hannibal's interior design might be more to Will's tastes, though he has admittedly not seen much of it. What he can see from his side of windows is a penchant for the Doric and rich colors and a degree of the austere. Will is not completely unaware of his gauche actions;

looking into Hannibal's house as such. But he is well within his rights. It is nothing short of payback and Hannibal owes him after sneaking a peek at Will shorn of clothing.

And it is not like Hannibal is unaware of this. He knows Will is looking from time to time, and though he overwhelmingly tends to feign indifference, there have been moments when he will stop what he is doing – cooking, reading, making a phone call – and turn and look directly into Will's eyes. It comes with such a force it nearly knocks Will over. And in response, Will huffs and turns away–

"Furthermore, let's not forget next weekend's barbecue at Jack's."

"Do we have to bring anything?"

"Don't say *have to*."

"Okay, but do we though?"

"Just bring yourselves."

–and pretends to have been opening a box, or cutting an onion. He never knew they made you cry so much. He always thought people were just exaggerating. Georgette never cried with them, not that Will had seen, but then again Georgette was a woman suited for the duties of a household. She neither balked nor complained, and took to responsibility as a finch to sky. Will wonders if he will become that way in time.

Kade says to Jack, "Now, is there anything you can do about the noise level coming from Luna?"

"They're kids, Kade," Jack says, shrugging. "What do you want me to do? Lock them in county for enjoying summer break?"

She makes a diffident motion with her hand.

Will doubts he will become that way. But he knows he must try. At length, Kade ends the meeting by asking if there are any lingering questions. She looks pointedly at Frederick and Will who have been mostly silent, content to simply watch the procession and absorb information. They have always been such a way in groups or with other couples. Silent, watching, then behind closed doors making fun of others and mimicking them to one another. But they have been so estranged of late that Will doubts there will be any intimate jeering post-meeting.

They shake their heads as one.

When the lot of them file out of Kade's house, the blue sky is awash in starlight. The lampposts burn around the looping sidewalk and Frederick and Will follow it to the left, taking in the lush lawns, the wavering boughs and perfumed air. Will takes Frederick's hand, looking aside.

"So, what'd you think?"

Frederick says, "Of what?"

"The meeting."

"Oh," he says. "It was a ridiculous waste of an hour."

Will snorts, smiling. "It was only an hour?"

Frederick looks at him. "Did you see how Kade was glaring at people who didn't raise their hands?"

"Did you raise *your* hand?"

"Please."

Will feels his heart fluttering as they come to their driveway. Frederick checks the mailbox, finds a few pizza advertisements and a small brown box, marked for Will. He hands it over and they ascend to the house.

"It's my book," Will murmurs.

"Taking up reading?"

"I do have some refinement," Will says, knowing he has none.

Frederick smiles, and opens the door for Will. At the side, from his periphery, Will sees the lights on in the house next door. And on the second floor, a man's shadow which soon flits from view. Will face heats and he swallows, going into the house.

*

Frederick asks, "Do you feel remorse?"

The man sits across from Frederick, a hazy look in his eyes. He seems to focus, then unfocus, and look out of the slim windows to their sides. His blue jumpsuit ruffled as if he'd been asleep. Frederick has seen their cots, and cannot imagine trying to get any substantial rest on them. He, too, has seen their food, or what passes for such in a place like this. They are, most of them, quite thin. Frederick thinks he shall become so as well if Will does not acquire some basic skills for cookery.

He is silent for a long time, and Frederick glances back down at the small sheaf of papers in his lap. Lars Lewis. Started three fires in quick succession one night, five winters ago. Six dead, two injured. Lars walked to the nearest police station with soot on his hands and turned himself in.

"Mr. Lewis—"

"Not especially," he says. His hands are folded in his lap. "I mean, not for the people anyway."

"Yet you turned yourself in."

Lars looks at him, startled. *How could you know that?* such a look says. Frederick says nothing to help him figure it out. It seems many of the patients here deal with a lapse in awareness, the extents of which vary. Some of them truly do not remember the things they've done. Some of them feign it. Lars is neither of these. He has the countenance of some appliance: indifferent, immobile, but warms up as such – like a toaster. Will burnt the toast again this morning.

"It's like this—" he says plainly, moving his hands up. "People, you know, they've all done something wrong. In their lives. At some point. Maybe something really wrong, so— what happened, I mean, what I did. It's not really that bad. I didn't know them, but odds are they had it coming. And if not me, then who?"

Frederick checks a box.

Lars asks, "And if not then, when?"

The pen twirls in Frederick's hand. "And if their deaths were justified, why did you turn yourself in, Mr. Lewis?"

The candor stops here. Lars looks to be cooling off, eyes unfocusing again. He looks back at the window and in this Frederick is not inexperienced. Lars knows why he turned himself in – he simply does not want to say. Frederick can take an educated guess. Despite his insane designation, Lars had enough sense about him that night to take in the child-parent adage, to wit: *You won't get in trouble if you tell the truth.*

In some way, it is probably the smarter route – though, only if you are assured of being captured post-act. Lars, however, was not. He lived miles and miles from the fires, had never been noted in that small town in rural Pennsylvania. Had he slipped off into the night, he would very likely be roaming still to this day. Lighting matches in ruined alleyways and snuffing them with the tip of his tongue.

Perhaps it would have been better not to know. Certainly better for Lars. And, yes, one could argue better for those left behind by his actions. Those in tatters in the singed snows.

Frederick feels a burgeoning roil in the pit of his stomach. Lars does not seem interested in further conversation on the matter and Frederick no longer cares. He notes the orderlies to take the man back to his cell and he himself makes his way across the hall for another long sabbatical in the toffee-colored luxury of his office. The interior left over from the prior administrator, which Frederick has no intent to rearrange. It quite suits him.

It occurs to him, depositing himself into the leather chair behind the desk: Maybe he should let Will have a look at the place. He might get some ideas for their own house, or Frederick could assist with some suggestions. Yet he thinks not. Will has been notably possessive of the household since they've moved in. Frederick lets him possess.

Frederick knows Will:

This is an apology. The best he can do since Frederick has frozen their marriage bed. And Frederick has had to familiarize himself with the overt strangeness that has become his own house— the horrid painting of a horse that welcomes him upon entry, that odd vase in the back room, the curtains – most of which they have yet to put up for the poor sizing – of various garish coloring. These things are much like Will himself: bright and slightly ill-matching. Charming in an odd, sulkish way.

Frederick thinks he should stop psychoanalyzing Will's offerings. It has yet to get him anywhere.

"Dr. Chilton?"

Frederick starts, and hears the voice as if it were in the room with him. But his assistant's voice is simply deep and loud, and from the other side of the thick wood door, she calls to him. He permits her entry.

Bailey pops her head in and Frederick cannot see her for the files she holds high and forward. Simply the frizz of black hair around their manila edges. From behind them: "These transfer papers need to be signed off. We're getting someone for the second floor basement. A Dr. Abel Gideon."

"Doctor?"

"That's what it says."

Frederick bites the nail of his thumb. When he swivels his chair, the sun from the window opens up to him and passes into one green eye.

*

Frederick left in the morning and Will finds he and Hannibal's wife are on a similar schedule. They walked out of their respective homes at almost the exact same time – and, too, Will noticed that others in the cul-de-sac also departed in the neighborhood of 8 AM. Will kissed his husband and in a spasm-like fit for intimacy, swirled his tongue into the man's mouth, which left Frederick hazy eyed and stumbling away. Will waited until he was gone, and grinned with his back to the closed door. He must be making progress. Perhaps Frederick does not find all of the house's interior shortcomings as problematic as Will thought.

Such a thing is not out of the realm of possibility; still, Will must keep trying.

He has a brilliant plan.

It came to him last night just after a dinner of hard-as-seeds risotto. Frederick busied himself somewhere in the upper levels of the house. Will washed dishes in the kitchen. There was nowhere else for him to look – he *had* to look into Hannibal's kitchen. In it, Hannibal also washed that evening's dinner dishes. Blue shirt rolled up to his elbows, his forearms coated in suds. After, he went about the kitchen, readying ingredients for the next morning's breakfast. He set the coffee machine. Will watched him, his gliding around the room, until he finally turned the light out and diminished into the inner recesses of his home.

In the morning, after Frederick left, Will followed Hannibal's footsteps up through the house: into their separate bedrooms, where Hannibal began to make his own bed. Will followed suit, floundering with the under sheet and crying out in shock when one side, once tucked, permitted the other side to come undone.

By the time he finished, Hannibal was already gone, and Will found him through the master bedroom's bathroom. Will watched for a long moment, astonished, as Hannibal shaved into his large mirror above twin sinks. The slow motion of the razor into the shaving cream, and leaving unmarred and smooth flesh in its wake. Hannibal committed this act shirtless, his hard-muscled back to Will, and Will felt himself heat and think it obscene. He closed the blinds in the bathroom and showered, thinking Hannibal must be doing the same thing.

As the day wore on, he followed the man around the house in something like obsession. There were times he could not find him, buried within the depths of the house as he must have been. At such times, Will felt himself worthy of a break, and took his newly acquired book to sit in the living room.

He could not take in a word of it. The letters might well have all been upside down or rearranged into two different languages. Every sentence he read he would immediately forget. He kept rising, languidly walking into the kitchen to check the window. Hannibal was elsewhere. So he would reseat himself and try again, to equal failure. The clocks in the house ticked seconds and minutes, until now hours have passed.

Afternoon burns to early evening and the light from outside bruises. Will's socks on the floors treading through orange light. He peers into the kitchen from around a corner and finds, through the window, Hannibal in his own, now seemingly preparing dinner. Placing a large pot from under a counter onto the stovetop. Opens the refrigerator door. Will tightens his fists at his sides and readies himself to enact the second part of his plan.

He goes to the door, tugging sneakers on.

Will the Cunning, he thinks.

The burst of outside hits Will, surrounds him, in the freshest of scents. The bounce of the grass beneath his shoes reminds him he shouldn't need them at all. From his step stones, crossing at the top of his driveway and then to the space between his and Hannibal's houses. He pauses here, minutely, one foot raised to take another step. He realizes he has not been here before, and it feels as if he is to step into a portal. Swallows, and reminds himself it is no such thing. He takes the step, then twenty more, until he comes to the door so much like his own.

Rings the bell.

It takes perhaps thirty seconds too long and Will squints, knowing full well that Hannibal is making him wait. He opens the door, and his sudden presence is much like the outdoors air had been: intoxicating.

"Good evening," he says, hair falling against his forehead. His body illumined in the light behind him.

Will shrugs. "Hey."

"Can I help you?"

"Can I come in?"

His gaze dots along Will, from his own green eyes to settle at his belt, then tap down his legs to end at his sneakers. Back up to Will's eyes. He stands back. "Of course."

Will presses his lips together, folds his hands behind his back. He walks in, letting his curls bounce just under Hannibal's nose. It is strange. He barely hears as Hannibal shuts the door behind him, and the cool of the house is reminiscent of his own. The same flooring, and gilt scrollwork upon the foyer columns. The lofty ceiling and polished banisters. Miraculously: a huge painting in the foyer, of a darkened wood, and in the off-center, bright against the hazy underbrush is a white horse. Will notices, lastly, the horn coming from the center of its forehead. Will blinks, confused. Finds himself startling at the scent of Hannibal behind him, walking in towards the kitchen.

"My wife purchased that," he says, allowing Will to follow him. They come into the bright kitchen, where something bubbles in the pot on the stove. Hannibal turns to him at the island. "I'm not overly fond of it."

"So— do you usually take care of the decorating? And— everything?"

"And everything," he says.

Will looks around. The kitchen is at once lived-in and stoic.

"I assume you came over for something."

Will jerks his head back, one eyebrow raised. Hannibal holds a chef's knife in one hand, a green pepper in the other. He chops slowly against the bamboo board, then slower, the undulation of his wrist drawing Will's attention.

"Yeah," he says at length. "So, I had something to ask you."

Hannibal is quiet. Deposits the peppers into a steel bowl, then pulls close a cluster of oyster mushrooms. Begins to de-stem.

"I." Will clears his throat. "I'm out of milk."

Hannibal's left eyebrow rises, but he continues to look at the board.

"I was hoping I could borrow some."

"Borrow milk."

"Well, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"So, is it all right?"

Hannibal says that it is and moves from the island, around Will, to the refrigerator. When he turns around with a carton of milk, he moves it to Will's outstretched hand, then retracts just as quickly.

Will frowns.

Hannibal looks grave, but beneath stern waters hides treasure chests of mirth. He says, "I'm afraid before I allow you to waltz off with my items, I must know your name."

Will tries not to look amused. "It's Will."

"Will," Hannibal says, curling the word on his tongue. He is standing a foot from Will, and once again permits his gaze to roam harshly over the landscape of Will's body in silence. The boiling of the pot behind them fills the room with sound.

Will looks up into the man's eyes and tugs on a thick lock of his own dark hair. "Stop it," he murmurs.

"Stop what?" Hannibal asks, watching Will's finger.

Will allows himself to smirk. He takes gently the milk carton without touching his fingertips to Hannibal's. "You know what." He swallows, readjusts his countenance, and adds, "Why weren't you at the Neighborhood Association meeting this weekend?"

"Did I keep you waiting?"

Will turns his head away. "It isn't fair if I have to attend those dull things and you don't."

"Have to," Hannibal hums, moving again around the island. "Then you misunderstand your role, Will." There is pleasure in the ringing of his name, like a bell, such that Will twitches at the sound. "You are not obligated to make an appearance. Kade Prurnell could hardly care for your presence; it is your husband she wants, and the rest of those who are deemed the providers of their households."

Will had gotten that particular feeling. "But your wife didn't go."

"She is not agreeable to it."

"What is my *role* then, Hannibal?"

Hannibal's back is to him. He lifts the lid from the pot and the room is permeated with thick scents. Pours the peppers and mushrooms in. "What are you to use that milk for?"

Will eyes it in his hand. "Making dinner. I saw this recipe online for wild rice soup."

"*That* is your role. See it done and done correctly, and you can forgo Kade's prattling for other pleasures."

Will twitches again. "I'm not very good at cooking." Pauses. "The other day I made spaghetti so hard it's like it hadn't been in water. Then I tried it again, and it was like mush. I ended up using the harder batch."

"Cooking is an art, like many things required in the home. Underrated, but no less important than any other endeavor made outside. As such, it requires a level of refinement."

"Are you calling me unrefined?"

Hannibal turns around, smiling. The lighting overhead darkens his eyes. "I am offering to give you some pointers. If you would allow it."

Will the Brilliant.

Will makes sure to look considering. At length, he shrugs. "I'll allow it."

He doesn't linger; Hannibal's gaze on him is oppressive, even by Will's standards. Hannibal walks him back into the foyer and Will eyes the unicorn once more before exiting the house with his carton of milk. As he stands on the grass just off the step stones, he waves the carton.

"I'll, uh, I'll buy you another."

Hannibal shakes his head.

Will lifts his shoulders a bit and begins to turn towards his house. He looks back at Hannibal over his shoulder and finds the man staring vehemently along the slope and curve of Will's backside. Will snorts softly. He turns and makes his way to the house. From the front door, he can see Hannibal shutting his own, and when he comes into his kitchen, he sees the man staring at him from across the ravine.

*

The lamp posts at the end of each driveway all burn under the sky. Frederick has turned off the main road into the fluted entryway of Sol Terrace behind his neighbor's Audi. As Frederick parks in his own driveway, he and the blonde woman exit their cars at nearly the same moment, clicking the locks behind them. Frederick doubles back down the drive to check the mail, idly looking over as she does the same.

Should he introduce himself? Would it be too forward?

Holding an electricity bill in one hand and his keys in the other, he waffles, and in the lamp light, the woman's hair looks spun of gold. He supposes it wouldn't hurt; the emphasis in this neighborhood on staying in-tune with one's surrounding families is apparent, and isn't it something he himself should foster? At least for appearance's sake.

By the time Frederick makes up his mind to engage her, she is already walking away with a thick stack of mail in hand. Frederick thinks this is par for the course.

She is in the warm cavern of her home, taken in by some unseen man whose flash of ashen hair is the only glimpse Frederick can get of him. Frederick approaches his own house and the door is opened sooner than Frederick can fumble the key in.

Will greets him in a white t-shirt splashed with unnamable sauces. Bare feet on the polished floors. One of his curls poised upward in a question mark.

"Hey! I know I look crazy, but everything's under control. It shouldn't be— well, terrible."

Frederick kisses him, and later, after they both end up with stomachaches from the wild rice soup, Frederick tells him he did a fine job.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts appreciated!

Superman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning light slides in through half-shut blinds and ribs Frederick's face in rosegold. One rib lies across his eyes; closed one second, open the next. And he feels Will warm and curled up under his arm, breathing slightly uneven for his consciousness. Will's fingertips trail lightly across Frederick's bare stomach and Frederick thinks it nice, comforting, almost enough to lull him back into sleep.

Will shifts; his hand further down the soft trail of hair centered at Frederick's stomach, to rest, barely, where the coverlet is drawn up. Then further down. Settling upon the sheer fabric of Frederick's boxers, the only barrier between Will's hand and Frederick completely rigid at waking.

Frederick's morning haze shakes immediately from his mind. He turns his head towards Will's curls, wild from sleep, and cannot see his expression. Will ducks his head further down to prevent this, and his fingertips press into Frederick, rubbing with light but insistent pressure.

"Will..."

"Shh."

There is a smile in the word, and Frederick swallows, does as he's told. The fingertips halt briefly, travel back up to the band of boxers, dancing along the pleat. Another pause, as if Will is giving Frederick time to protest. He supposes he should – in the light, Frederick can clearly see the red runes seared into Will's arm. And along his torso, which the jostled cover reveals. Yet by the time Frederick thinks he cannot bear to look at them any longer, Will's hand has in one motion shoved the undergarments down Frederick's hips and has him complete and full in hand, the warmth of which is so foreign and remembered that Frederick releases a shuddering groan, breaking the morning stillness.

Will hums, acknowledging. He moves his hand steady, slow. Re-familiarizing himself it seems, and Frederick instinctively draws Will closer to him with an arm. The fingertips trace the underside, light, then the heel of the palm meets and heat resurges.

"W-Will. I don't think I w–"

"We won't," he says, calm. "Just this."

Just this?

Will takes his hand away and though Frederick has protested, he immediately regrets it. He watches through half-lidded eyes as Will brings the hand to his candy-pink mouth and licks to coat it with an obscene amount of saliva. Frederick's toes in mid-curl before Will has

even laid hand to him again. And when he does, Frederick grits his teeth to suppress the resulting sound— somewhere between a cry and a moan. Will rests his head again on Frederick's chest and watches his own hand and Frederick watches it between long slow blinks and looking at the ceiling and the window which is shining anew with each passing second of engorged morning.

Will tilts his head up. His mouth at Frederick's ear. Sighing into it nothing that Frederick can really discern. All available faculties are zeroed in on Will's sugar-sweet grip, and the way Frederick's heated flesh slides through, and how long it's been since he's allowed Will to touch him this way.

It is only too obvious he is on the precipice and has been almost since Will began. In his periphery and under a copse of curls, Frederick can see Will gnawing on his underlip and grinning, elated in his own power, and even giggling as Frederick's hips buck up into the slippery downslide, and when Will's enclosed fist meets the base, he murmurs, clearly, "Ricky."

Frederick gasps and comes in tandem, feeling only the bright-white and Will's firm kiss in his ear.

After hard-breathing and realizing he's lounged in bed well after his alarm – did it even sound? – he kisses Will, muttering into dark hair about lovely distractions, to which Will snorts laughter into their pillows. Frederick showers, and when he re-enters their bedroom, Will is still half-entangled in the white covers, and his skin is pale and glowing red, and from his curled position on the mattress, he is grinning wildly at Frederick.

Everything is a bit rushed and slowed at the same time. Frederick eats burnt toast, which is at the very least slathered in apricot jam. Will tastes of it at the door. He is in pajama pants and a shirt pulled on inside-out and leans into Frederick against the double doors, his sweet tongue in Frederick's mouth, arms around neck.

Will does not seem agreeable to letting go— yet, Frederick is going to be late. He gives Will one firm squeeze at his backside, and with that, departs.

Frederick feels heated at his neck. It is not the summer weather. At the side, he sees the Audi already further down the street, at the stop sign, then turning. Frederick starts the car, and realizes that he just received a handjob from his husband and proceeded to make out at the door. He almost laughs. It's been a long while.

*

Will has always done this.

Frederick can remember every fight they've had, every disagreement and tiff, each moment they did not see eye-to-eye, from eight years back when they first met. And whenever the onus came upon Will to set it straight, he always did so with his body – for, he must have known, it is an apology Frederick cannot help but accept.

Three years into their marriage, when Frederick had been invited to a gala, he brought Will along. Will made little attempt to hide how painfully bored he became over the course of the night – Frederick expected this, but knew the other psychiatrists would bring their spouses. Thus, Will was obligated to come. He oft wandered about the celebration hall, downing small fluted glasses of champagne in one knock-back.

From over the shoulders of Frederick's colleagues, he watched Will sauntering about, attracting attention. Men and women alike entertained him, touched his shoulders. Will eyed back to find Frederick and with a glossy-faced grin, returned the flirtations of those around him. Going so far at times as to lean into men's ears and whisper. Frederick could feel his face heat, burn, until he no longer cared what those next to him were saying.

On the drive home, Frederick cried out in frustration, hands on the wheel, "Why do you *do* that? Why do you flirt with people in *front* of me?"

City lights of yellow and red rolled along Will's body. He chewed his thumbnail and eyed over at Frederick. "Why do you like it?"

Frederick thought he was going to crash the car, so livid was he. When they arrived home, he went to the study with a book and shut the door behind him. How long passed, he didn't know. He read and tried not to give Will's drunken assertions any merit. The words on the page were nonsensical.

The door opened. Frederick refrained from looking back – he stared fervently down into his book, until just over the top he saw pale legs walking by. Looked up. Will stood in front of him, pallid and rose-pink, stark nude with himself heavy in one hand and a small bottle of lubricant in the other. Will looked down at him on the cream-colored sofa with a passive expression. Frederick surely must have been gawping.

Will deposited himself down on the cushion next to Frederick, nuzzling under until Frederick's arm settled around Will's shoulders. Will seemed to pay him little mind otherwise– he flipped the cap off of the bottle, spilled some into his hand. More than necessary. Placed the slick fingers around the length of himself and, reclining against Frederick's body, began to slowly stroke.

Frederick remembers being stunned. What did Will expect from him? To watch silently? Was he meant to touch? Was he *allowed* to touch? Will gave him no verbal cues, nor any eye contact, for such a long time that Frederick wondered if he forgot he was not alone, so lost he became in his own motions.

As he began to tighten his grip and mewl in that soft, precious way of his, motions becoming more erratic, he finally looked up into Frederick's eyes. Firestone green illumined by oncoming orgasm. He jerked into his hand, shuddered. Whole body blooming like a rose.

"See," he breathed. "There's nothing wrong with liking to watch."

He came, spurting across the upholstery, and pulled Frederick on top of him after.

Frederick has never refused an offering of remorse when the offering is Will. Shall he do it again? How easy would it be to take Will as he wants to be taken and, in this, attempt to move on? If Frederick fucks his husband, will that blazing cipher disappear? Or will it burn hotter and brighter, until it is all that Frederick can see?

*

Will waits until 10 AM, a full two hours after both Hannibal's wife and Frederick have departed for work. He stands at Hannibal's doorstep, bright-eyed, audaciously cheerful as he rings the doorbell.

Plants his hands behind his back and waits. He can hardly keep from smiling. This morning was lovely – Frederick let Will have some range. And after that terrible soup for dinner last night, he thought he was light-years away from any sort of intimacy. When he woke this morning, it was not a plan as such, just a longing. He did not expect to get as far as he did.

Will the Brilliant is in fine form. He will master his duties with the help of Hannibal Lecter. And he will coerce his way back into the marriage bed his own foolishness tripped him out of. Stunning.

"Good morning, Will."

Will looks up into those dark eyes. Smiles. "Hey."

It's almost tangible: the weight of Hannibal's gaze on him as he enters the house. He has known for days, since Hannibal's comment about his view, what kind of man Hannibal is. And if Will is going to comfortably gain tutelage, he is going to need to set some ground rules.

He turns around on a heel, back against the counter in the kitchen. One knee bent and bracing himself against the cabinets. He looks at Hannibal standing feet away. "Let's get something straight," Will says, gripping the counter behind him. "I know what you're doing. And I'm not here for that, all right?"

"Oh?"

"*Oh*. I have a husband." Will flashes his wedding ring. Nods to Hannibal's left hand. "And you have a wife."

Hannibal does not acknowledge this. He takes a step forward. "Then it seems I've misread you, Will. My apologies."

That was easy. Will tilts his head airily. "Accepted." He pauses. "Thanks."

"Of course." Hannibal takes another step until he is inches away from Will and, without touching him, reaches behind his head to a cupboard. As he takes down two white mugs, he looks nowhere but into Will's eyes, his countenance kind and open. "We will simply

continue on as if you are not attracted to me." He shuts the cupboard and goes to the other counter, where the coffee machine freshly percolates.

Will is red-faced and wide-eyed. "Ugh," he cries. "You're exhausting."

"You have no idea."

Will's inner temperature rises. "*Hannibal*—"

"There there, now," he says, looking down the counter at Will. His face particularly jovial. "I'm only teasing you, Will."

"Jesus."

At length, Hannibal takes note of the coffee's readiness and pours two mugs; one for himself and one for Will. Will did not agree to drink coffee, but he does not refute the cup. Hannibal leads him through the kitchen and into the dining room where there sits a long wooden table between planter boxes on one wall and a fireplace on the other. In Will's house, the dining room is barren. He sits at the table to the left side of Hannibal. This is just another thing he must order.

"I have so much to do," Will says idly, looking into the warm brown liquid. His rippling reflection distorted. "It's kind of weird. I never had this much responsibility before. Not even at any job I worked."

"Then you are new to staying at home?" Hannibal asks, sipping.

"Staying at home. Makes it sound luxurious and relaxing."

"I assure you it is, once you become accustomed."

Will sighs. He raises an eyebrow over at Hannibal. "You're supposed to be accustoming me. Why are we drinking coffee?"

"Do you not like it?"

"It's fine, but..."

Hannibal smiles. "In a moment," he says.

He makes good on his word. After they finish drinking, Hannibal takes Will to the top floor of the house and Will feels a strange sense of familiarity. This house smells different, however, lived in, and faintly of myrrh. Will's still smells lightly of paint. He sees on small end tables littered in the hallways oil burners and adds these to his mental checklist.

They come into the master bedroom, that which Will has seen from afar. Will blanches immediately, seeing Hannibal standing near the wide and rustled bed.

"Come here," he says.

"Hey–"

"Will." He looks as if Will is the one being difficult. "Come help me make the bed. I have noticed you are ill-equipped at doing so yourself."

So he has been watching. Continuously. Will has seen him, facing away or hiding behind his ash-brown bangs. And yet he saw Will aflounder nonetheless. Will wonders if they do this to each other: pretend to look away and yet are, fervently, looking.

Will walks over to the bed, looking up and away from Hannibal. He takes the sheets in hand where Hannibal takes the other side.

Hannibal is chuckling. "Have I offended you? There is no shame in it."

"You sure make it *sound* shameful."

"You must have had hired help in your last house."

Will thinks of Georgette. "Yeah."

"Did your husband not want to hire another?"

Your husband, your husband. Hannibal is beginning to sound like Kade. "I can make decisions *too*, you know," he says, shaking out the sheet with more than enough force. "And I refused one. I want to be able to do this kind of thing. You say it's relaxing? Well, let's see."

Hannibal's smile is soft and visible as the sheet comes down between them. The blankets smell of lilac and some cologne that Will already associates with Hannibal: a deep earthy scent. A secreted cove in a wood far away. He wonders if Hannibal's wife – *Bedelia*, Kade said – smells of lilac. He looks down into the fabric softened bedclothes. He wonders if they had sex last night, or even this morning.

Do you know what kind of man your husband is? he wonders.

Over the course of the morning turning afternoon, and the afternoon turning early evening, Will follows Hannibal idly around the house. It is strangely exciting, being inside the place he has looked to from across the grassy ravine. The same ravine exists between Hannibal and Will – though Hannibal will, on occasion, eye Will in a fashion not unlike hunger, he keeps a safe and reasonable distance. Will thinks this is all he can really ask.

He looks around the house to find a picture of Bedelia and does not succeed. He simply wants to see what kind of person buys a portrait of a unicorn. Part of him thinks it must not be so different from the kind of person who buys a portrait of a racehorse. Will does not take this line of thinking further.

The sun has burnt gold and slides through the wide windows of the kitchen. Will finds himself staring at his home, his own empty kitchen.

A view grown in beauty.

"What does your husband like?"

Will jolts and turns around to find Hannibal tying a white apron around his waist.

Hannibal clarifies: "To eat."

Will tenses his eyebrows and looks skyward. "Um," he says. "Well, whenever we go out, he likes to get mushroom or pumpkin risotto. I tried to make it last week."

"And how did you fare?"

Will frowns heavily. "How do you *think* I fared?"

Hannibal doesn't respond to this. He makes a vague come hither motion with his fingers and Will does as he's told – at some remove, he's aware Hannibal's intent is to make some impression. Will won't give him the satisfaction of knowing he has. In the next hour, Hannibal glides through the motions of making a shitake mushroom risotto with such ease that he might have known Frederick's favorite meal prior. Will watches, stunned, and laments. He tells Hannibal he will never be able to chop vegetables with such precision. Hannibal tells him all things worthwhile take time.

When the risotto is finished, Hannibal has already washed all the dishes in the interim, the lulls between steps of preparing the risotto. The kitchen is spotless, and the dining table in the next room is set for two. To add to Will's wonder, he thinks back on all they have done today: the laundry, the cleaning, Hannibal speaking on accent colors and the importance of empty spaces in a room, and what treatment to use on the particular brand of hardwood flooring in their halls.

Will dips the spoon he's given into the pot, blows, and takes a bite.

He sighs heavily, blushing in anger. "What are you supposed to *be*– Mr. Perfect Superman?"

"Exactly that."

Will snorts softly. He looks at the dying light outside. "I should get going. I'll try to make this– if I can remember all the steps, that is."

"I've made more than enough," Hannibal says, replacing the lid on the pot. "Would you like me to send you home with half?"

"Oh, God, no. Are you kidding? If I burnt toast this morning and came out with this tonight, he'd definitely know something was up."

"And you couldn't tell him you followed a recipe?"

Will is heading for the archway to the foyer. He pauses here, hand on the wood of the jamb and looks to the side at the linoleum. Bites his lower lip. "My husband knows when I'm lying," he murmurs.

Hannibal follows Will to the foyer and sees him out onto the porch. The lampposts burn and light the street, and the sun is deep behind their houses. The porch light at Hannibal's door attracts tiny moths and they beat in circles above Hannibal's and Will's heads.

"If you cannot remember the steps," Hannibal says, looking into Will's eyes, "come back to me."

Will takes a step away, smiling. "You're too much."

"You have no idea."

Will tries to make his sigh sound put-upon. He does not know if he succeeds. He takes off from the porch, down into the lush grass and across the ravine to his own house. When he is back inside his kitchen, he tries to feel if he is any different after spending all day learning. He looks down at his hands, harsh in the overhead lighting. No, he is the same. He feels the same.

*

Two months ago, when the runes first appeared, Frederick nearly shrieked. He was in a precarious state of mind at the time besides and the fervent red along Will's body shocked him. He thought it was some sort of affliction. Upon closer inspection, and when Will seemed not to notice them at all, he figured it for a delusion.

He spoke to himself as he would speak to a patient:

You cannot concretely face what Will has done. This collapses facets of your life which include but are not limited to: the image of the little coquette you made vows to – whose flirtations with others seemed harmless at their base – fading, and the idea of your marriage in tatters. The threat of losing the one thing that added daily shocks of happiness to your nonentity. The marks on Will's body give substance to an abstraction and as such serve as a coping mechanism.

But seeing where he touched Will – where Will allowed himself to be touched – does nothing for you. It will drive you further apart.

He stopped talking to himself that way. It didn't help – self-diagnosis is a crock and he does not think himself equipped to handle such things. He, then, thought on seeing a therapist. He thought better of it.

And thinks better of it still as he spends time in the second basement floor, in the ill blue lighting that crosses his face. He stands before the cell of Dr. Abel Gideon, having been told the man was too riotous to risk moving on the day of his arrival.

Abel does speak like a doctor, though his training is in medicine and not psychiatry. Frederick doesn't think he would like such a voice handling these fragile things inside his mind. In some way, they are precious and he continues to protect them. There are handprints over his feelings, as well as over Will.

There he goes again.

He sets to task:

"Abel," he says, diverging from honorifics, "so sorry to have to conduct your entry interview down here. Dreary as it is. But you know your history better than anyone." He glances down at the pages and pages of disciplinary write-ups from the institute in Massachusetts, which spat him into this darkened hall like so much mucus.

Abel Gideon is unassuming, short. With thinning brown hair and glacier eyes, he hardly seems the man described plunging his thumbs into a nurses' eyes. Nor the man who, as his inciting Incident, murdered his wife and her parents around the dinner table.

"No apologies necessary," says Abel. "I know how these things work."

"I'm sure you do."

"Will I like it here, do you think?"

Frederick eyes idly around the lonely hall. "You shouldn't find yourself out of place." He raises his pen to paper. "Now— Abel—"

"Why do you not call me *doctor*?" he asks. Frederick looks up, and finds the man standing close to the glass wall. Countenance calm, wondering.

"Let's keep things informal," says Frederick.

"Oh, that's funny."

Frederick looks down into the papers. "Thank you."

"Then, is it all right to call you—" He peers at Frederick's Administrator badge. "Frederick?"

I'll have you sedated for it. "Please do."

Abel looks delighted. "A bit formal. How about Ricky?"

Frederick bristles noticeably.

Abel has caught it. He smiles, and something about it reminds Frederick of Will's cat-that-got-the-cream grin in bed this morning, though Abel himself is far removed from the pillars of majesty that hold aloft Will's grace.

"Ricky it is then."

"Abel, I know you've gone over this in court— as such, it might seem repetitive, but could you tell me why exactly you chose to murder your wife and her parents at dinner?"

"I didn't like the casserole."

He has a good memory – the same statement given to police and then a grand jury. Frederick taps his pen against the clipboard.

"I'm joshing you, Ricky," he says, leaning against the glass. Frederick narrows his eyes and forces himself to endure it. To refute the nickname would excite Abel's interest in it. One must never give import to a psychopath's tauntings. That way lies ruin. "But your wording is all wrong."

"My wording?"

"Yes, yes."

Who is the psychiatrist here – me or you? "Do elaborate."

"Choose. Why did I *choose*. But we never *choose* these things, Ricky. It's written in the stars."

Frederick holds off on rolling his eyes. He checks a box. "Thank you for that kidney stone of knowledge."

"You know what I mean?"

Frederick eyes at his watch.

Abel continues: "You know how sometimes you just *have to*. You feel something in the air, like a vibration, or one of those high-pitched noises you can never find the source of. It's like that."

"Are you saying you had no control over yourself at the time of their deaths?"

"I'm saying there is me and there is Fate, and in that moment, ah—" He looks into Frederick's eyes, smiling softly. "We were one."

Frederick is not unaccustomed to delusional patients, but of late he finds them more and more off-putting. He takes his leave without much in the way of grace and when he is in the corridor, brightly lit, he thinks he must feel some sort of wry kinship with delusionals at this point.

There he goes again.

*

If Hannibal Lecter's risotto was a ten then Will would gauge his own as a four. Maybe a five, if he were to be generous. Though it never mattered what Hannibal's tasted of – Frederick only tasted Will's, and after the litany of one's and two's Will had been capable of prior, a five seemed the world.

Days go by and Will finds himself rigorously determined. He takes into account all that he learned from watching Hannibal on Monday and sets this uncanny rhythm to his own house. He forgets much, and remembers awkwardly. In such a time, he comes back to

Hannibal's house, ringing the doorbell, asking what sort of dryer setting he should use for this particular fabric.

Hannibal takes this opportunity to coax Will into his sun-laced dining room for a cup of coffee, over which he dances around the initial question.

"There's only five settings," Will says, agitated, and sips at the dregs in the mug. "I really need to get back."

Hannibal smiles at him. "I enjoy your company, Will. I spend the vast majority of my days alone, as you do. Do you not think companionship necessary?"

"I don't mind being alone," Will says, turning his nose up.

"I do."

"Then maybe you should've rethought this." He motions generally to the house.

Hannibal follows his motions with his eyes. "Perhaps. Though I don't regret it."

"If you don't tell me which setting, I'll go bug one of the others." Will makes this threat with no real force behind it. He knows there are others in Sol Terrace who are in such a way – Phyllis and Beverly might be in that group – but he does not feel at ease going to them with his inadequacies.

Hannibal sips the last of his coffee. He says, "You need a drycleaner, Will."

"Oh my god."

After this, Will relents and allows morning coffee with Hannibal to be a rote part of his routine. He comes to Hannibal with questions – *okay but what does it mean, 'green' cleaning products? do you want this crazy vase? why does water leave spots on glassware? where do you buy your curtains?* – and Hannibal fields them between sips of chestnut-scented liquid, and over small bites of pastry he has left over from breakfast with his wife.

Will is licking cream from his thumb, and looks down at his crumb-laden plate. "How long does it take to get good at this?" he asks.

"It is a constant, evolving process, which one never masters. Much like any art form."

"You keep saying that – art."

"You do not believe it to be true?"

"No," Will cries. "I'm the worst artist ever, if it is."

Hannibal smiles at him, his eyes alight. When Will leaves the house to go back to his own, he knows Hannibal is watching him and does so with a slight wistfulness. It is a common enough notion – of course Superman is lonely.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts much appreciated!

Grilled

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They are a bit lopsided and look to have an obscene amount of chocolate chips in them. But they are indeed recognizably pancakes and, when Frederick takes a maple syrup-slathered bite, they are quite good. In the back of his mind, he recognizes he will probably have an intense sugar rush. He balances each bite with a sip of Will's fabulously bitter coffee.

"It's amazing, Will," he says to his husband who stands at the counter, pouring his own mug. He is barefoot and in naught but candy-striped pajama pants. Runes accounted for along his torso and dull in the sunlight. "I didn't know you knew how to make pancakes."

Will looks back over one shoulder, smirking, with half his curls sticking up. "Oh," he says, coming to the island. "They're not *that* amazing."

"Much better than burnt toast."

Will flicks his ear.

"You've been learning so much," Frederick says, rubbing at his ear. He tents his eyebrows down at the syrup on his plate. "I know I'm not around much presently. I've been having to deal with settling in reviews of the files, this new transfer who gives me a headache—"

"Hey, I'm okay," he rushes to say, sitting across the island on a stool similar to Frederick's. His eyes wide and butterfly green. "It's totally fine."

"But you aren't used to doing all of this, Will."

"I want to. I want—" He pauses, searches. "Refinement."

Frederick raises an eyebrow.

"Besides," Will continues, looking into his coffee, "I've been getting tips. You know, on household stuff. Otherwise, there'd be no way I could have made pancakes that didn't taste like sawdust."

"Oh, from the internet?"

"Well."

"Then where?"

Will licks at the corner of his mouth – a spot of chocolate. There is a rune on his neck, the fingers of which follow the curve of his stubbled chin and touch nearly at the chocolate spot. Will looks to be licking at the fingertip and it forces Frederick inly to cringe. "From the

next-door neighbor." Jerks his head at the leftside window. "The husband. You know? To that blonde woman."

"Oh. Oh, yes." Frederick pauses to look out the window. He sends Will now a quizzical glance. "You mean the 'weird' guy?"

"Well, yeah, I mean— he is sort of weird, but he's pretty nice, too. I mean," Will's cadence picks up speed, "he knows a lot about this kind of stuff. Seems like he's been at it for a while, and— well, he offered to help me out."

"So, he's teaching you to cook?"

"And about decorating, and stuff."

"Stuff."

"Remember how I said I started taking your clothes to a drycleaner? He recommended one."

Frederick remembers — he could barely keep from expressing relief at Will not shrinking another one of his shirts. He feels something slightly heavy in his stomach. Perhaps it is all the dough. Taking another, the last, sip of coffee, he says, "I'm glad you're getting along all right. Perhaps I'll meet him at the barbecue this weekend."

Will is nodding, humming.

*

At intervals throughout the week, Will has managed somehow to get through half of his book. He does not know why he continues — he finds it somewhat off-putting and has never had much interest in alluded incest, but he imagines Hannibal Lecter reading it and continues. After Frederick has left for the day and Will has returned from his second cup — one which remarkably never turns out quite so bitter — of coffee at Hannibal's, he sits in the living room, book in hand, and hears distant sounds: the washing machine's rolling swish, a skylark on the power lines, the gardener making his way around the loop of Sol Terrace.

Will shifts his legs on the couch. One thumbnail in his mouth, chewing idly. Is this what Hannibal meant about pursuing other pleasures? Relaxing?

Surely a man like Hannibal would mean something more carnal than page-turning. Will stares at the words before him and frowns heavily. To think: Hannibal Lecter making such an obscene and fervent play for him when they had barely met. He did so with all the assurance and shamelessness of one who has done such before. Numerous times, perhaps. Yes, it is obvious to Will that *that* is who Hannibal Lecter really is. How many people? How many times? And when? And where? Here? In their very neighborhood?

When Will gazes out of the front-most window, and sees his neighbors' comings and goings, he imagines Hannibal propositioning them. He imagines them accepting. And yet at

the same time, he cannot imagine it. The image tears his mind asunder. Perhaps not, then. Perhaps not their neighbors.

Then.

Will wonders if that is why Hannibal stopped his practice.

Earlier this morning, as Will sat with Hannibal over coffee and custard-slathered brioche, he asked how long Hannibal had been *staying at home*, his own jargon.

"Since I closed down my therapy practice, six years ago," he said, cutting into his bread with knife and fork.

Will used his hands. "You're a psychiatrist?"

"Indeed."

"So is my husband," he mused, mouth full. "What does your wife do?"

"Couples therapy."

A marriage counselor, Will thought, licking custard from his thumb. He grinned over at Hannibal. "Man, you guys must be all over each other's cases with your feelings. Sometimes it's hard enough with just one therapist in the house. I can't sneeze without him asking my thoughts." He paused. "Well. He used to be like that, but I think I shook him out of the habit."

"It could be a result of his career. It could also simply be that he cares to know what you think." Hannibal looked over at Will in what Will took to be an expectant manner. "Are you open with him?"

"I-I am." He furrowed his brow. "Don't *you* start therapying me too."

"Hmm. Therapying?"

"Whatever."

Will can imagine this more clearly: Hannibal, with his finely pressed clothes and his murky stare. An office not so unlike his home— vast and dimly lit. Patients sitting across from him, releasing their woes. Their psyche weak with worry and on full display. And Hannibal, in all good manner and sharp features, taking to them as a seal to arctic waters.

Perhaps his wife found out. Perhaps — Will cringes a bit — one of the patients came to her behind Hannibal's back when Hannibal refuted any deeper meanings to their dalliance.

It was just for one night.

But I love you.

Will winces, feels a headache. He can no longer abide sitting, indeed cannot abide the house and he strides from the couch, to the foyer and the outside, June on his face. The sun is half-hidden in clouds. Will finds himself once again at Hannibal's home.

"Hello again," Hannibal says, opening the door and standing back for Will to enter. Will does so, curls bouncing, his white t-shirt wrinkled from tossing about on the couch.

Will turns to look at him when the door is shut. Eyes him over once, fully. His black button-up, his grey slacks. Something thrums at Will's closed lips, some riotous line of questioning:

How many times? Do you still? Have you always? Does she know?

"Why are you reading this?" Will asks, holding the book up in one clenched hand. It is upside-down and backwards, but Will thinks Hannibal knows what it is.

Hannibal raises a scant eyebrow. It crosses Will's mind, briefly, that Hannibal now knows Will has been paying microscopic attention to at least parts of his daily life. Instead of making mention of it, Hannibal tilts his head and says, "Well, I'm not reading it. I was last week."

Will blanches. "You mean you're done?"

"It's quite a quick read."

Will eyes the five hundred some-odd pages in his hand.

Hannibal looks to smile and turns away easily, striding through the house. Will is on his heels, frowning heavily. They come to the back of the house, in the relatively small room that is dense with reading lights and armchairs, and a large walnut bookcase that Will has seen from his own house. It is full to bursting and a few feet taller than Hannibal himself. Will's shoes sink into the plush carpeting in the room, and he watches silently as Hannibal takes a book from a mid-level shelf, turning to show Will that it is twin to that held in his hand.

Looking down into their copies of the books, Hannibal says, "As you must know by my accent, I am not originally from this country. Therefore, I suppose I feel a kinship with this book and its narrative of a foreigner's navigation and struggle to find a place for themselves in a strange and unfamiliar land."

The sun outside is dimming.

Will looks from Hannibal's calm countenance down into the glossy covers. "I'm not sure I got that from this so far," he murmurs, reddening.

"What have you gotten from it, Will?"

"Ah," he says. Looks up, aside. "Well, I'm not done yet." He flips idly to the dog-eared page he last blurred through. "But it just seems a bit— incestuous. Which, you know. If that's your thing."

Hannibal draws Will's gaze – Will isn't sure how he does this. But he does and they are looking into each other's eyes. Hannibal's burn with dying sunlight through the window.

"I would not exactly call it my thing. But David's draw to his mother is not only a manifestation on his father's intangibility but on the incestuous nature of origin-set boroughs post Ellis Island. The Polish with the Polish. Irish with Irish. It is a comment on keeping with those like us for survival."

Will raises an eyebrow. "So is this something you experienced?"

"In some way, it is universal."

Will presses: "But did *you* experience it?"

"I would not deem it so." He pauses and smiles, the smallest bit. "Not to this extent."

Will makes a somewhat satisfied noise and matches Hannibal's smile. Shakes the book in his hand. "Well, therein lies the problem, Superman." He waltzes around Hannibal for the bookcase behind him. The rows and rows of titles and authors gazing up at him, down at him. Will takes one finger to a thin-spined book and touches the inlaid gold etchings. "I don't think I'm really one for all this difficult subtext." He furrows his brow at the books. "I'm trying to find some kind of peace, if you haven't noticed."

Hannibal is behind him, perhaps a foot. Will can feel the air in the room shift with his body. "Difficulties can provide a sense of peace."

"That so?"

"Indeed."

"Try me."

"I shall," he says, and his hand is placed upon the book spines, a few inches from Will's. Will looks up at their hands spaced apart. The rings upon them, and the veins standing out on the back of Hannibal's.

Will glances back over his shoulder, into the hollow of Hannibal's throat. "Stop it," he mutters.

"Stop what." It has not even the inflection of an inquiry.

Will sighs in a mockery of long-suffering, and sidles from between Hannibal and the bookcase. He walks across the carpet for the door. "I'll read something else," he says. "Pick something. I have to go get dinner started."

Before he leaves the room, he hears Hannibal say: "As do I."

Frederick has been considering what happened in their bed earlier in the week. Indeed, he cannot help it, as even at work, when he is inundated with paperwork such that he fears he will never be free to leave, it flashes in his mind like a warning sign: Will's hand trailing down his stomach, the kitten grin on his lips, the slow sure slippery grip which has been forged over eight years, tailor-made to fit Frederick.

Frederick has flinched at his desk, thinking of such.

He remembers: when Will was but twenty-two with a nimety of brashness, and not a bit of reservation or finesse. He kissed like he was eating and he fucked like he was trying to hurt himself. Frederick lolled on diffidence, unsure if he should interfere. At length, he found it exhausting, and one night while Will sat atop him, before he began his jackhammer motions, Frederick gently yet firmly took his hands to grip the boy's hips.

Will looked at him, startled minutely, then slyly interested.

He'd said, "Show me how you like it."

Frederick showed him.

Frederick has always been one for compromise. Not long after, he found that Will liked having his hair pulled – suitable as an incentive. He held Will by satin tresses, compromising his position, and encouraged him to move slowly and with a pressurized purpose. Will's trembling thighs and watering eyes hinted he found it agreeable.

It has haunted Frederick's dreams within the past two months, two weeks – he counts the days, sometimes the hours – that he has not felt Will in that way for so long. Will has been eyeing him with some emotion Frederick cannot name. In bed in the morning, in the days after the handjob. Perhaps he is asking permission to do so again. Perhaps he is asking for Frederick to make the move.

That seems more Will's game.

Your turn.

Tonight for dinner, Will prepared gnocchi with sage and a brown butter sauce. The gnocchi was pillowed by too much flour. The sage might well have been raw. But Frederick sat astounded nonetheless.

Frederick asked, "Did the neighbor help you with this?"

Will gave a feeble pout from across the marbled island. "Well, he suggested and gave pointers. I made it myself though."

Frederick nodded thoughtfully then. And now, he stands in their bedroom, looking out of their large window at the neighbor's house, their window. He is dressed in boxers and a black shirt, wondering why Will has not yet ordered proper curtains.

From the bathroom, Will strides out in pajama bottoms, toweling off wet hair. Steam billowing in his wake. Frederick watches him in the window's reflection: tossing the towel

haphazardly to the floor, flopping onto the bed, sending sheets and the coverlet rising around him. The soft light from one nightstand lamp highlighting the sheen of his curls.

Frederick's hand twitches. He remembers the feeling of those curls sliding between his fingers.

"Do you think," Will begins, half his face in a pillow, "the barbecue thing will be fun? Maybe we shouldn't go."

"Why not?" Frederick asks, turning fully.

Will's legs kick. "Well, Kade will be there. I don't like her."

"She really doesn't seem all that bad, Will. Perhaps a bit... tedious. But then, who isn't, at times?"

"I'm not."

Frederick snorts laughter and comes to the bed. Depositing himself beside Will, he looks away from the lightly glowing marks on his body. The neighbor's window is alight, but their curtains shut them from sight.

"Maybe you will grow to like her," Frederick says tentatively, "the way you grew to like the weird neighbor."

Will's body pauses for a fraction of a second. Then resumes: the gentle swings of his legs, the roll of his shoulders into the mattress as he comes to prop himself up on elbows. He says, "Like might be pushing it. He just helps me, gives me advice."

Frederick has thought about this. This, too, has wheedled its way into his mind, at his desk, in front of patients. Today, Abel Gideon sent riotous word up from the cells that he would like to speak with Frederick. Frederick told Bailey he was too busy and ordered the staff to sedate Abel for stirring up the others. But in truth, he was not busy. He sat at his grand desk and chewed a pen top and thought of this man, this Hannibal Lecter giving Will advice. Teaching Will the art of pancakes.

Oh, said he to himself, *the man is married*.

Yet that did not stop *Will*.

Frederick looks down at Will now. His expression is tentative, demure. This is a recent development. Before these two months, Frederick has rarely seen Will without a flippant expression, no matter the subject. He treads softly.

"It's all right for you to have friends, Will," Frederick offers.

"Okay, I know that, but he's not."

"If he were, would you tell me?"

Will makes a small noise. "Do I need to report my friends to you?"

Frederick looks at him.

"Fuck. Sorry," Will says, rising up on his knees. "That was stupid, I just—"

"No—" after a moment's consideration, "—you're right."

"I'm really not. You have every reason to—"

"Let's try to move past it." Frederick has said this before, in mantra-fashion, such that it feels to his own lips like rehearsing a line. He moves to rise from the bed but Will has shot over into his lap, settling facing him. Hands on Frederick's shoulders, nose under the corner of his jaw.

"Then let's *really* move past it," he murmurs, kissing. He pulls Frederick's hands to his thighs. "I need to. I really do. You have no idea."

Will's lips upon Frederick's. After which, Frederick says, "I might have some idea."

"We never talked about the other morning." Will's hands under Frederick's shirt. Slowly raising the hem.

"What is there to talk about? It was lovely." He pauses Will's hands. Gently. Looks down at the pallid body marred. "But I can't right now, Will. I really can't."

"Can you not tell me why?"

If Frederick told Will why, he would surely be locked in the second-level basement, next to Abel Gideon. Instead, he kisses Will lightly, and removes him from his lap. When they go to bed, Will faces away from Frederick and Frederick stares at the hands upon his back, which glow in strobes, which auger terrible things, or map where they have already been.

*

It is 3 PM on Saturday and Frederick can only think it is a wholly inappropriate time for a barbecue. He is midway between lunch and dinner and does not feel quite up to digesting the vast amount of beef, pork and other fauna Jack Crawford has tossed upon his elaborate grill. He made such a comment to Will upon leaving their own house fifteen minutes prior, but Will did not seem in the mood to humor him.

The Crawfords' backyard is much like Frederick's and every other in the neighborhood. The vast lawn stretches to a belt of trees at the back and on either side — Jimmy to the left and Brian to the right — there is no fence, which Frederick has taken only light note of prior, and finds it odd but not incomprehensible.

Jack's patio is furnished more widely than their own; he has green lacquered picnic tables and unlit tiki lamps. A ways from the impressively wide grill, billowing smoke and

flame, is another, smaller table on which sits a blue-lit stereo system belting out Luther Vandross into the June day.

Before the man returned back to his station at the grill, he shoved two artesian beers into Will and Frederick's hands, and left them to listen to Beverly Katz as she whispers in high volume and points in a way she must think is furtive.

"I mean, really," she says, sipping from her third consecutive beer bottle, "who wears heels to a cookout?"

Frederick and Will look over at Kade. She lingers at Jack's side, and from the man's expression, looks to be nagging at him. Phyllis stands nearby, grinning behind a hand.

Beverly continues on; Will adds in fragments of sentences and Frederick can tell he's half-listening. His curls are perked and dark in the serene sun and he is bright in an aerated white shirt and loose-fitting jeans. The backyard fills with more neighbors, some of whom Frederick recognizes immediately, some not. Over near the grill, he hears Freddie Lounds' cry of anguish as she has spied a New York strip steak touching her vegetable skewers.

"Two inches, Jack! The two inch rule!"

"Freddie, hush."

Frederick finishes nursing his first beer and is walking to the cooler to fetch another. He stops short, catching some glaring light and finds, upon raising his gaze, that sunlight has been caught and tangled in a head-full of golden hair that is newly imparted in the backyard. Frederick recognizes her: his next-door neighbor, she who walks with Frederick in the mornings, and walks with him in the evenings, she with whom Frederick has not yet broken words.

"Oh," she says, turning her gaze on him. Like Kade, she too wears heels – red, to match her spaghetti-strapped sundress. "I believe you are our new neighbor. I'm Bedelia."

"Yes," Frederick says and registers the *our* just as a man comes to stand next to her. Grey slacks and a red button-down shirt. Frederick has seen the man's flash of ash-brown hair, his sturdy forearms. He looks up into the man's face, the tidal wave force of his eyes and the smooth curve of his mouth, and he feels something like iron drop into his stomach. The man's chest is broad, straining at his dress shirt, his shoulders rounded and thick. And, Frederick notes with a wet horror, he is inches *taller* than Will.

Frederick is still staring at him as Bedelia sticks her hand out to him. "It's a shame we haven't had the opportunity to speak," she says, taking his hand and softly shaking.

Frederick limply participates and is too overcome with grief to recall that she has had ample opportunity to make his acquaintance. He says, "Yes, it's such a shame."

"This is my husband, Hannibal."

Frederick is not looking forward to shaking the man's hand. He gets it over with quickly. "Frederick," he says to introduce himself, clearing his throat.

Hannibal nods, relinquishing the clasp in timely fashion. "I've heard much about you from Will."

Jesus Christ. "Oh, lovely."

As if summoned by mere mention, Will seems to materialize at Frederick's side and looks as unenthused as Frederick feels. It is something, at least.

Bedelia eyes Will plainly. After an instant of studying him, she says, "Ah. You must be Frederick's husband."

Frederick inly cringes.

"Yes," Will hisses, grinning through his evident displeasure. "Frederick's husband. That's just who I am."

Nonetheless, he shakes Bedelia's hand. He looks away, aside, anywhere he can save for Hannibal's face, though Hannibal seems intent on drawing Will's gaze. Frederick knows they are already well acquainted, yet takes note that they engage in no friendly contact. Frederick had to endure Jack's heavy pats on the back upon arrival, and even Beverly gave them both sound smacks on the upper arms. Hannibal and Will give each other a wide berth.

It is only when Phyllis calls out from behind, "Food's ready!" that Frederick realizes the four of them have been standing in minutely awkward silence for whole minutes. He exhales and is glad for the reprieve.

The three picnic tables are separated, seating six people each. Frederick and Will end up side-by-side across from Freddie, Brian and Beverly, with Jimmy on their side of the bench. Freddie can only look morose, picking at her vegetable skewers, complaining about the zucchini being contaminated.

"You're not going to taste the meat," Brian finally says, mouth full of half a hot link.

Freddie cuts a glare at him. "What do *you* know? I bet you haven't tasted a vegetable in years."

"I have, and they don't taste like anything."

Freddie looks away.

"They're water, you know," he continues. "Like, ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine-nine—"

Jimmy seems to stop listening and eyes over at one of the other picnic tables, one harboring Hannibal and Bedelia. He says to the table, "Did you guys think they'd show up?"

"They're like hermits." Beverly is wobbling on the bench. Her sixth beer drained. "I know Bedelia works, but Hannibal never wants to do anything with us. He's totally stuck-up."

Jimmy looks up. "Just because he didn't want to join your beadwork club, doesn't mean he's stuck-up."

"It's not about *that*..."

"-nine-nine-nine-nine--"

"Oh my god, Brian, shut up." Freddie bites into a singed potato in ire. She chews, pauses, gags. "It's awful!"

"Did she make those skewers herself?" Jimmy wonders.

Brian rolls his eyes. "Store-bought."

"I paid *money*," Freddie stresses.

"And anyway," says Beverly, "he said he would stop by for a meeting and never did."

"Beverly."

"I'm just saying. You don't have to lie. You could just say you're not interested."

Frederick watches with mild interest at most. He notices his right arm is warm, nearly starting to sweat, for how close Will is sitting next to him. Leaning into him, one hand resting lightly on Frederick's thigh. Will seems to have disregarded his plate to place the side of his head upon Frederick's shoulder. And though Frederick prefers this to the cold-shoulder he has been receiving all day for his sexual rejection of Will the night prior, he cannot help but feel it is a bit of overcompensation in light of Hannibal's appearance.

Will's eyes are half-lidded under black lashes, and though he looks mostly at their tablemates, Frederick can see his gaze flit to Hannibal's table – where he dines with his wife and a few others, including Jack, Phyllis and Kade. At this, Will's grip on Frederick tightens.

Is this Will's idea of reassurance?

Or is it the fact that Will has had two beers and has always been a sopping lightweight?

It might well be both.

Dessert is an array of fruit pies – apple, cherry, blackberry – all of which Phyllis has made herself. Freddie seems sedate, knowing there has not been any cross-contamination. Beverly has one slice of each, to which Jimmy complains that there isn't enough for her to do that. And Brian looks to be rising in discomfort as Will completely ignores his apple dessert in favor of kissing at Frederick's neck, sighing and murmuring things of which Frederick has no idea.

The sun is dipping below the treetops, the roofs, and in the shadows Frederick sees both Hannibal and Bedelia from the other table looking this way. Bedelia makes her glances slightly clandestine. She scans the full expanse of the backyard and all within, then goes back to speaking with Kade. Hannibal's gaze rests indisputably upon their table.

Will presses the full of his mouth to Frederick's neck. Frederick lightly rubs at the small of Will's back in subtle attempt to ease him off.

Brian says, feigning cheerfulness, "So, Frederick, what do you do?"

"Oh, I, ahem—" Frederick flinches at Will's teeth on his ear. Hannibal's gaze, from over Brian's shoulder, is fervent, burning like the setting sun in the west. "I'm the General Administrator of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane."

Will's mouth is wet. His hand moving slowly, steadily, from top thigh to inner thigh, and gripping there.

"I'm a psychiatrist," Frederick clarifies, unprompted. He swallows, and tries to keep his gaze from Hannibal's.

At this point the entire table has looked up to listen to Frederick's line of work, and have found Will latched onto him.

Beverly raises one eyebrow largely. "Whoa. He a big fan of apple pie or something? Keep him away from mine."

Brian elbows her.

"He's just a bit tired," Frederick says, smiling, and Will seems encouraged by the fact that he has Frederick completely rigid in his trousers. Between Will's hand and Hannibal's calm sunset gaze and everyone at the table making small-talk about apples dethroning oysters as potent aphrodisiacs, Frederick cannot help but think he's wandered into some strange world and time in which he can do nothing but react. The only way he can think to get Will to settle is to promise, lowly and into his alcohol-flushed ear, a blowjob upon their return home. And yet, by the time the music stops and they bid Jack and Phyllis goodbye – when everyone disperses to their own identical homes along the lamppost-lit sidewalk and Hannibal's eyes are still on them, Bedelia's turned icily away – Will passes out on the couch almost upon entry.

Chapter End Notes

Stop it, Hannibal.

Wives

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I mean, not to be rude or anything— but your wife seems like a total bitch."

"To some, Will, that might be considered a bit rude."

Will eyes Hannibal over the rim of his coffee mug. It smells of chicory and the dining room is flooded with mid-morning light. Birdsong fills the morning; Mondays are quiet, nothing but the emptiness of half the street's residents who spend their weekdays somewhere in the city of Baltimore, thirty-minute commutes from the soft grasses of Sol Terrace. Will smiles into his cup. "And are you *some*?"

Hannibal smiles back, almost secretive. "No," he says.

"Didn't think so," Will murmurs, satisfied. He replaces the mug on the dining table, beside the small plate that was but moments ago filled with an almond croissant. Will has a fraction of an almond sliver caught between his molars, and licks at it with his tongue distractedly. "I mean, you heard what she said to me. *Frederick's husband*," he mimics, elongating the words as Bedelia had in Jack's backyard. "Jesus."

"But you are his husband, Will."

"I know *that*. But I have a name!" He pauses, as if struck. "Hey, did you tell her about me beforehand? Like, you know— that I come over here and all?"

Hannibal nods. "I spoke to her about you."

"And what'd she say?"

"Not much, admittedly."

Will scoffs. He leans back a bit in the chair, tilting on its hind legs and rocking. Arms crossed over his chest. "Wouldn't surprise me if she hated me." He raises a dark eyebrow. "Probably'd hate me more if she knew about how you're always sniffing around me."

Hannibal's eyes reflect the sunlight and turn a miraculous hazel. "She might hate further that you come to our house to let yourself be sniffed."

Will blanches, and lets the chair fall forward with a small thud. He huffs and looks aside. "Oh, whatever, Hannibal."

He continues: "That little display you made of yourself at the Crawfords' – was that meant for me to sniff at as well?"

Inly, Will groans. He remembers it, but only through the haze of whatever hopped-up beer overflowed Jack's coolers. He shouldn't have even finished one, let alone have two. He was slightly angry— he remembers that. Frederick has been refusing him for so long – *what do you expect, stupid? look at what you did* – that he's barely had any sexual outlet. And then there he was, and the sun was warm, and the brilliant oranges of the sky were caught in his thick brown hair. And Will was struck by an overwhelming longing for him, for when Frederick could barely keep his hands off of Will before Will tore that fervent gaze asunder.

Peripherally, he was aware of others around, their upturned gazes and their frantic searching for conversation. More pointedly, Will was aware that Hannibal himself watched from one of the other picnic tables. As idly as he watched Will that first day, from the bathroom window.

Will bites his lower lip. Tugs at an errant curl of his hair. "That was not for *you*, you pervert. It was for my husband."

"Though he did seem unsettled by it."

Par for the course, though Will keeps this to himself. Frederick of late treats the idea of sex as if Will is some witch who would seek to ensnare him. Will would apologize, profusely, if only Frederick would allow it. At some point in the night, when Will woke from his alcohol induced sleep, the house was dark and Frederick's profile stood barely visible in bed, by the thick bars of moonlight through the blinds. Will looked across blearily, and noticed all of Hannibal's windows were close-curtained.

He asked if Frederick was awake.

Frederick assented, and touched Will's right arm in the dark. The covers shifted and their mouths came together, for merely an instant. Then apart: Frederick's skin along Will's, and his hands pushing, at once, both the covers and Will's boxers down. Frederick asked if Will remembered what was promised.

He kissed along Will's torso, downwards, in a sort of zigzag motion, as if he were avoiding random pieces of Will's skin. Will was too heated to notice or care much and in a moment, he didn't care about anything at all, just jammed his hands in Frederick's hair and, thinking back, knows he could not have possibly lasted thirty seconds. Forty-five would be hugely generous. When Frederick's mouth was full, when he was swallowing, Will was in tremors and pleading inanely to be fucked. Frederick came back up to him, kissed him, for so long and so slowly that Will was sure he was about to get exactly what he wanted. But in the end, he did not.

Will's coffee is cold.

He rests one elbow on the table, chin in hand. He is looking in Hannibal's direction but past him and out of the window, where there are only radiant beams of sunlight through thickly boughed trees.

"Do you think," he begins, "jealousy in a relationship is healthy?"

Somewhere, on a power line perhaps, a finch is calling.

Hannibal says, "Yes, Will. A reasonable amount, I think, is natural. Especially when it is brought about by just cause."

"Just cause," Will echoes.

"Yes."

"You mean like— like cheating."

Hannibal eyes him steadily. "That could be one source. Infidelity is rather extreme. Jealousy can justly occur in the aftermath of something much simpler. A glance. Perhaps the way a partner's body adjusts when in the presence of others. These things a long-term partner can sense, like sonar."

Will's gaze turns from outside and refocuses on Hannibal. "And how extreme have you been, Hannibal?"

Another finch calls. Or a robin.

Hannibal says, "As extreme as you have been. Though many more times."

Will jolts and has no time enough to speak before Hannibal calmly removes himself from his chair at the head of the table. He gives Will a quick smile and leaves the room, allowing Will to sit in shocked silence. His face is bright pink and he thinks he should refute Hannibal when he re-enters, whenever that shall be. Tell him he doesn't know what he's talking about. Tell him that his assumptions are ridiculous and offensive. Tell him he's an asshole.

But he returns and, standing at the other side of the table, he bends slightly and places a book on the tabletop. Will looks at the glossed cover, then back up at Hannibal, and says only, in a small voice, "You chose a new one."

*

Frederick cannot avoid it any longer. He has hidden in his office long enough and must see to Abel Gideon, lest the man cause a riot down in the cells. Bailey reports that Abel has taken to shrieking, which churns the other patients into frenzy, despite their various medications.

As Frederick's Oxfords click with Bailey's heels along the polished floors, he says, "Did he say *why* he would like to speak with me?"

She shakes her head. "No, sir. Only that it was *urgent*." She makes quotations with her middle and pointer fingers.

"He's been asking for me since before the weekend," Frederick says, standing at the door to the second floor basement wing. He speaks into a walkie-talkie to have the automated locks released, and as he takes the door handle, continues: "If he's not dead yet for not having seen me, it's not all that urgent."

Bailey half-smiles, waves.

The long corridor again. Frederick has yet to acclimate to it; it is far removed from the comfortable office where he used to conduct appointments with patients. He remembers the Back Bay district of Boston, the high-rise buildings and the wind-tunnel effects on late fall days. The lunch hour scents of seafood and steaks emanating from storefronts. Standing on a corner under the grey sky. Thinking of his new husband back home, and flushing with remembrance of all they had done the night prior.

This is a far cry from all he knew.

"Yes, Abel," Frederick says, tries not to sigh, as he comes before the last cell. "You said you had urgent need of me. Now here I am."

Abel Gideon is against the glass wall, perked and cheerful. He does not at all look like someone who could cause the others to riot. But Frederick knows looks are highly deceiving.

He answers himself quickly, in that good-doctor tone he has used on so many: *You are wrong. Will's looks never deceived you. He is what he has always been. Alluring to everyone around him, and he enjoys it; such is the nature of those who have never been under any illusions of their own beauty. Societal reinforcement is nice, but the mirror is key. And Will knows the mirror. He has fallen in love with it, so deeply in love.*

Frederick's whole body shivers. He looks up, finds Abel cocking an eyebrow at him.

"Something wrong, Ricky?"

Frederick swallows thickly. "Perhaps we could stick with whole first names."

Abel's face glows. "Ah," he says, settling forward in his lean upon the glass. "So informality has gone out the window, hasn't it? Or is it just that Ricky is too personal?"

Frederick doesn't allow himself to outwardly cringe. "What is it you wanted to see me about?"

"Oh, you know. Just to chat."

"Abel. I'm not here for that."

"Well, you're my psychiatrist, aren't you? They said I was under your care."

"And you are," Frederick says, struggling to keep his voice from betraying his fathomless well of annoyance. Too, his concentration is frayed. Will keeps flashing in his mind like a warning sign, those runes along his body red-hot. The remembered taste of salt on Frederick's tongue. He shivers. "But we have set times to meet. You are not my only patient, and I'm very busy."

"I imagine you are," Abel says, nodding solemnly. "Forgive me; I haven't had a psychiatrist before. This is all very new to me."

"Perhaps if you'd had one before, you would not be in this— predicament."

"Predicament," Abel echoes. "I like that! Much better than imprisonment."

"Pleased to help."

"You're so polite, Ricky."

Frederick turns on his heel. "If there's nothing else—"

He only makes it one step before Abel says, "You married?"

Frederick looks back at him.

Abel grins. Nods. "You're married." He raises his left hand. "I can see it."

Frederick thinks perhaps it is a mistake to wear a wedding ring when dealing with psychopaths. In his private practice, it never came up. Secretaries might make mention, but no patients. Frederick turns back and can only look beleaguered.

"So, your wife, are you two happy?" Abel asks, and Frederick is able to withhold any smile at the mistake. "I mean, is all good in the neighborhood?"

"Yes, Abel."

"Too quick an answer."

Perhaps Abel does have some latent ability which would, in another life, allow him to be a psychiatrist. Or at least a high school guidance counselor. But Frederick does not let this slip past, and he walks backward a step until he is again square before Abel.

"Is this a cry of longing, Abel?" he asks, tilting his head slightly. "Are you, perhaps, experiencing some feelings of remorse for what you did to your own marriage? Thereby inquiring as to the state of mine, hoping mine is in similar shambles?"

"If yours was in the state of mine, your pretty wife would be dead, Ricky."

"How do you know she's pretty?"

Abel grins, as if he and Frederick share a secret. Motions to Frederick's dress. "Come on, now. Sharp man like you? You've got to have a humdinger socked away in a nice house. Degrees and prestige attract little trophy wives."

"Is that what your wife was? A trophy wife?"

"Something like that. So, Ricky, you see," he says, lowering his voice, "you and me, we're a lot alike. Men cut from the same cloth, if you will."

Frederick eyes him. Their ice and leaf eyes lock and hold.

"No," he says finally, "I don't think we are much alike, Abel."

Abel continues, almost as if Frederick had not spoken: "When they show up in your life, it's like magic, isn't it? They're bouncy, bubbly, complete bitches in bed but we do love them for it. That little expectant expression they give you – over their shoulder or staring up at you. Demanding. It's so charming. And you get so wrapped up in it, so lost for it, that somehow you seem to sink into this pink cloud where you assume they're only giving *you* those eyes. Those endless demands. You've grown to love them, really. To cherish them, hell, they're almost sacred at this point. And then one day you find out." Abel shrugs. "That she's fucking someone else."

Frederick is very still. He says, pronunciation slow, "And so you killed her."

Abel says, "She killed me first."

*

It is dark out when Frederick arrives home. He is late, just a few minutes, but feels a strange off-courseness jolt his bones as he sees the Audi already in its driveway beside the Bentley. Frederick slows and the lamppost lights roll over the slick sheen of the Escalade, from the hood to the window, and the light shines in Frederick's left eye. He pulls into his own driveway and parks, the engine humming to silence. In the dark of his car, he looks aside and sees his neighbor's lights on, similar to his own house.

He has not told Will this, but the thought of him hanging around Hannibal sends unease throughout his body, in the same circular and rushing fashion as blood.

Before seeing his face, he was just a nonentity, an abstraction. Someone Will sought out for help, or perhaps who offered help to Will. And then, at the barbecue, all of a sudden, that nonentity was real and feral and as solid as a mountain before Frederick. That easy gaze on Will. The friendliness with which Hannibal shook Frederick's hand. All so nicely put together that no one would think—

"Do I have to report my friends to you?"

No. No, he does not. That does not stop Frederick's head from hurting, however. He sits in the Escalade for a moment longer, looking down into his lap. His throat and eyes begin to heat.

"Frederick?"

Frederick jolts, head flying back into the headrest, knees jerking up into the steering wheel. He groans, rubbing at his neck, and looks out of his tinted window.

"Sorry, sorry! Didn't mean to scare you!"

There's suddenly a blinding light in Frederick's face, such that he cannot see who is behind it. He blinks harshly, groaning and raising a hand. The light subsides and Frederick exits the car, blinking again, finding in the residual lamp light that it is but Jack Crawford, standing in the driveway. Frederick looks down at the flashlight in his hand. He is no longer in his police uniform, just jeans and a long-sleeve red shirt.

"Jesus, Jack," Frederick says, exhaling. "You startled me."

"I'm sorry, I know—" He pauses to shrug. "I know it's odd, but I've been seeing weird things lately, and I wanted to check over here. I wanted to ask if you've noticed anything."

Frederick eyes his house. "Weird things? What kind of weird things?"

"Well, specifically some kids. Kade was complaining to me this weekend." He rolls his eyes, leaning in. "They're not bothering anyone, but she thinks they've been stealing mail."

"Well, why doesn't she just check her mailbox regularly?"

"That's what *I* said!"

Frederick smiles, releases a small chuckle. "Well."

"Right, I shouldn't be bothering you like this." Jack raises his flashlight, wiggling it a bit. He takes a few steps back, towards the street and his house on the other side. "Go on in and enjoy your evening. Tell Will I say hi."

Frederick nods, then raises a hand. "Hey, Jack?"

"Hmm?"

There's a pause between them, and Frederick shakes his head. Turns a foot towards the house. "Nothing," he says. "Tell Phyllis I say hello."

Jack says he will do just that and they part ways. Frederick finds himself in his own house, his own foyer, that strange horse staring him in the face. He turns into the kitchen, setting down keys and shrugging off his blue suit jacket, at which time Will looks up from where he leans by the counter. In his hand is a book, and there is a pot simmering behind him on the range. His smile is hopeful, expansive.

And Frederick cannot tell if he is the worst person in the world or if it just feels like he is. He should simply forgive Will in totality and relinquish any ill feelings.

You did not divorce him. He pleaded with you to stay and you did, therefore you cannot torture him in this way by giving him a glimmer of a marriage. You deal in half measures, which will get you nowhere. These feelings must be addressed, calculated, wrested with, and then dispersed. There is no other way.

Frederick flinches, and he washes for dinner.

Over a meal of too-spicy gumbo with slightly overcooked rice, Frederick finds himself saying, "Will. I feel I have to say something about Hannibal. It will drive me insane if I don't."

He is chugging water for the heat. Looks up with wide green eyes. "Yes?"

"It's just—" Frederick exhales largely. "Listen, in light of things that have happened, it just makes me feel *uneasy*, you spending so much time with him and—" *I sound terrible, I sound terrible, I shouldn't be saying this*—"I mean, I know it's ludicrous, because he..." Frederick is stuck. There is nowhere to go and his mind has raced ahead to all possible outcomes. Should Frederick reason that Hannibal is married and thus would never, the unspoken would read that the fact that *Will* is married means nothing to Will.

Frederick forgets but he has been silent for a long moment. Will nods, half-smiling.

"You don't trust me," he says.

"Will, it's—"

"I get it," he rushes to say. "It's okay. It's something I have to earn back, right?"

Frederick says nothing.

Will looks aside, down, tugging at one of his curls. He mutters that he needs to show Frederick something, and quickly leaves the kitchen. Frederick stares down into his nearly empty bowl. When Will returns, he has something in hand, and places it gently on the black granite island. Frederick stares at the book for a moment.

"*The God of Small Things*," Frederick reads, punctuating with the lilt of a question. He looks back up at Will. "Another book?"

"Hannibal recommended it to me," he says. He laughs, shrugs. "I'm only a few pages into this one and already I can tell I'm going to have trouble."

Frederick raises an eyebrow. "So, you two... have a... book club."

"Well, I—" Will stops, considers. "Uh. I guess."

"Interesting."

"Ricky, we haven't touched each other," Will says, re-seating himself. His countenance is relaxed, open, and he looks into Frederick's eyes. "Not at all. I just need someone to talk to, a friend, I guess. And since— since I'm really not feeling it with most of the other people around here, and I'm in the house all day..." He trails off.

"So you *are* friends now."

"Well, there's no *contract* or anything. But I guess."

"And you don't think he's weird anymore?"

Will snorts. "Of course he's *weird*. He married that weirdo Bedelia and they both live together, being weird with their weird unicorn painting."

"Unicorn painting?"

Will is nodding. "But he's pretty okay. And you've got to admit, my cooking has been vastly improving under him."

Frederick wishes Will would not use the phrase 'under him' but does not make issue. He says, "I'm glad you're getting along, Will, really. I'm sorry. I've been so on edge—"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Don't apologize," Will says. He looks down at the book between them, nibbling at his lower lip. For a moment it is silent: just the clock on the wall ticking, and on the street a car drives past – in or out of Sol Terrace, it is unsure. Finally, he looks up at Frederick and smiles, both eyebrows raised. "Hey," he says, hurried, "I've got an idea."

*

It is early evening on Tuesday and Will is standing idly in Hannibal's kitchen. He sees the box on the island and the huge stockpot of boiling water and has already decided he wants no part in this.

"Do we have to kill them?" Will asks, a whine creeping into his voice. The vast room is flooded with purple haze from the sunset.

Hannibal is standing in his apron, a placid smile upon his face. He watches as Will peers once more into the box of snow crabs. There are two, and Will finds them horrid. Their spindly legs and cold black eyes.

Hannibal says, "It would be hard to eat them alive."

Will glares up at him. "Superman's got jokes. Well, I'm not doing it. This is inhumane."

"You can simply watch," Hannibal allows. He takes a small ceramic bowl from the countertop and spills its contents into the boiling pot: sea salt flakes as light as snow. He goes to the box where the crabs wait, restless. "There will come a time when you must do this yourself, I'm sure. It would please your husband to come home to a crab dinner, or even lobster, prepared by your own hands."

He takes the crabs, one in each strong hand, and drops them into the roiling water. Will hesitates for a moment, sliding his left foot forward over the tile. He looks up at Hannibal, then back down.

"Come look," Hannibal says.

Will nods, taking a full step. He looks down into the pot to see the crabs writhing, their legs reaching out, then seizing up. For an instant, it seems as if they two are hugging each other, embracing finally, before death. Will's eyes widen, darken, deepen. They are now very still, and their shells begin to turn color.

Will straightens, and Hannibal places the lid over the pot.

"You, uh," Will says, clearing his throat, "you really think he'd like it if I did this for him?"

"He might find it charming."

Will snorts a laugh. "Charming," he echoes softly. He leans back against the edge of the island and shrugs. "So, I was talking with him last night. We, well, *I* was thinking it might be nice if we all had dinner together, at some point. Maybe this weekend, if you and Bedelia aren't— otherwise engaged," he says, rolling his eyes and grinning.

"I'm unaware of any prior engagements," Hannibal says. "Is there any particular reason for this?"

Will considers. He might lie. Tell Hannibal he just thinks it would be nice. But he doesn't. He says, "Frederick's worried. He thinks there might be something going on between us, so I want to show him there isn't. Since we do spend a lot of time together, it'd be nice to ease his mind."

Hannibal eyes him for a long moment. From the curves of his face, his pink lips, to the belt line of his jeans. "I'm afraid your plan may have the opposite effect," he says in low tone.

Will makes a prolonged groan. "It *won't* if you can stop eyeing me like I'm a fucking *steak* for one evening."

"I made no such glances at you while we were at Jack's, this weekend past." Hannibal lightly lifts his shoulders, then drops them. "But you know this as well as I do, Will: our bodies speak to each other. And your husband will notice the conversation is not chaste."

Will's entire face has gone red, and he looks away from Hannibal, out towards the window. How utterly ridiculous. He taps his foot against the tile for a long moment, before saying, sternly, "I can handle this. I can handle having an attractive male friend. I'm not a fucking whore, you know."

"I did not call you one, Will."

"Yeah, well, *he* did." Will swallows down harshly and refutes any heat at his eyes. He closes them, re-opens them, and exhales a deep breath. He is not looking at Hannibal but can feel the older man's gaze on him, heavy, settled, as if it does not mean to go elsewhere. Will shrugs lightly. "Just once. After he found out— after he found out about what I did. He took it back the next day, but I haven't forgotten." Will is still turned away, facing Hannibal's front lawn, the hazy pink sky. Their lush neighborhood. "Sometimes I wonder if he still thinks that about me."

"Have you asked him?"

"I cannot simply *ask* him, Hannibal."

"He is your husband, Will. A lack of communication may indeed be why you feel you must go through current extreme lengths, such as drunkenly seducing him in a public place, or making desperate attempts to show him you are not, or shall we say no longer, unfaithful."

Will looks back at Hannibal. He feels something like anger in his chest, only fleetingly, and then he takes stock of Hannibal's expression, which is only matter-of-fact, or even stoic. Will has seen Frederick with patients in the past, and he too wore such a look. Will makes a slight disgusted noise and bends over the counter, propping his head up on his hands.

"I keep forgetting," he says, "you're a psychiatrist."

Hannibal smiles, one eyebrow raised. He removes the lid from the pot and a plume of steam rises between them. "I am also, apparently, your attractive male friend."

Will pauses, mouth parted, and so suddenly, starts laughing.

Chapter End Notes

... Apparently. Thoughts appreciated!

Goddess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The night sky is bruised and there is honeysuckle on the wind. Will felt it too warm for jeans and so he wears shorts and a deep blue t-shirt, standing beside Frederick on Hannibal's doorstep.

Frederick is whispering as if Hannibal is right on the other side of the door. He may well be. He says, "Are you nervous?"

Will is always surprised at how keenly aware of his moods Frederick is. Perhaps it is the product of being together for so long. At times Will cannot stand it as he thinks it is some trick of psychiatry. Now, however, he finds some comfort in it. There is no plausible reason to be nervous since Will has been here so many times, has had Hannibal cook for him countless times. Yet he has not spent prolonged moments with Hannibal in front of Frederick and what was said at the beginning of the week has weighed heavy on Will's conscience.

Our bodies speak to each other. And your husband will notice the conversation is not chaste.

Will frowns. Has he been doing something wrong all this time? Even when he was so adamant and upfront.

His body speaking.

Ludicrous. Hannibal is a pervert and a lunatic. Will is just going to have to show him, and show everyone present, that there is no talking going on between their bodies. He straightens his stance and looks, perhaps too resolutely, towards the front door.

"Nope," he says, nearly glaring at the house.

Frederick raises his eyebrows, shrugging. He is clad in summer-light grey slacks and a pinstripe shirt. He holds in the crook of one arm, like an infant, a bottle of Louis Jadot. Will learned from Hannibal earlier in the day that tonight's menu would be largely dependent on fish, and thus relayed this to Frederick. A moth flies low overhead and Frederick flinches away from it. Will slaps a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

The door is suddenly open and Hannibal looks calmly out onto his doorstep – where Will is swatting, grinning, at a moth and Frederick is ducking continuously.

Hannibal smiles. "So good to see you. Please, come in."

Will feels himself straighten, glancing into the fathoms of Hannibal's eyes. The returned gaze is welcoming, friendly, far from the marauder expression he often gives when they are alone. In this, Will feels some relief. They enter the house, thanking Hannibal for his

hospitality, and Will remembers coming here this very afternoon, in the light of day, when the Y and L Landscaping lawnmowers roved the neighborhood, whirring in the breeze.

He stood in Hannibal's kitchen, all frayed nerves. "Maybe this is a bad idea, like you said," he murmured, shifting from foot to foot. He cracked his neck, popped the bones in his fingers. Looked across the chrome room shrewdly. "And not for your weird body talk reasons."

"Then for what reasons?"

"I'm worried you'll—" What? Fuck it up? Would that be all right to say? Whether prudent or im, it seemed Hannibal knew his heart, and he smiled as if it were a joke.

"I would not endanger your marriage, Will."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" He tilted his head back. Wanting to believe, and yet unable to. "And why not?"

Hannibal brushed a lock of ashen hair back from one eye. "Because I am your friend. As such, I will offer my aid to your— dilemma."

Will pursed his mouth. "My dilemma."

"Yes."

Will was not quite sure what he meant by that and to press, he felt, would be futile. Hannibal does engender such murky seeming at all times, and Will knew this was no different. He feels there is no course but to trust Hannibal's sincerity; at the nonce, he nods smoothly to him, little else. The dining room is to the right and back into the warmly lit hallway. Will and Hannibal make to walk that way and stop, both turning back to see Frederick staring up at the vast painting of the unicorn.

Will has grown quite accustomed to it. He comes back to stand beside his husband, and Hannibal joins him. They three stare up at it, wordless.

At length, Will nudges Frederick with an elbow. "See? I'm not the only one with bad taste."

"*Will*," he mutters.

"Quite all right," Hannibal says. "I do not much care for it either."

Frederick raises an eyebrow, then they resume staring at it. Another moment passes. Frederick winces, and then says, "It's not so bad."

Will furrows his brow. Then sighs, loosening his shoulders. He cannot find anything *not bad* about it. Before he is able to speak to it, he hears the soft click of heels against the glossed floor and they turn as one to the sight of Bedelia in the archway. Her blonde hair a soft gold, still as the unicorn's mane in the painting. She walks forward to greet Will and Frederick, and tells Hannibal she will put the wine on ice.

Thick gold bangles hang at her wrists. A delicately chained gold necklace lingers at her soft cleavage. Her form is swaddled in a dark purple dress which complements the purple pinstripes on Hannibal's shirt. Will wonders if they have planned it that way and as they file into the dining room – its space now much more sedate and opaque than the sunlit room in which he and Hannibal oft brunch – he thinks of them in their bedroom, behind that curtain. Languishing in that deep, walk-in closet at the back corner of the bedroom. Hannibal taking from a place pinned high: a soft laced bra that he gently fastens around his wife's ribcage. Allowing his thick fingers to trace along each rib. The bones of her shoulders.

They sit around the dining table; Hannibal and Bedelia in front of the extinguished fireplace, and Will and Frederick across from them. Will watches as Hannibal pulls out Bedelia's chair, his gaze on her attentive.

How odd, Will reflects. It is as if waking from some strange dream. This cannot be the same man who, during their days at home, spends his time staring at Will's backside and, in the reflection of his eyes, Will swears, he can see the man contemplating which pieces of furniture Will would look best bent over.

Yet here he is.

It dredges up in Will again that age-old quandary:

Does she know, Hannibal? What kind of man you are?

Hannibal looks over the table, through the candlelight and into Will's eyes.

That look seems to ask: *What kind of man am I?*

Will shivers, shudders, looks down into his plate.

"How lovely," Frederick is saying, and he too has the same florid plate before him, which Hannibal announces is a Sicilian-style tuna Carpaccio. He goes on to explain that this is merely the first course, and Will inly cringes, thinking Hannibal is only making his paltry skills in cookery look worse.

The wine is poured into each deeply bowled glass, and it shimmers and catches the light. Will takes a delicate sip from his own, and places it far away. He does not intend for tonight to be as it was at Jack's. Yet. Will takes the side of his left hand to graze it along Frederick's thigh. Just a light touch. It seems to cause nothing but worry and suspicion, as Frederick pats his leg in return, a quick and furtive motion, so that perhaps their hosts will not take note. Will sighs.

Bedelia's wine is nearly finished. She sits across from Frederick and he says, perhaps to engage her since she has been mostly silent: "Your home is beautiful."

She eyes him over the rim of the glass. "As I'm sure yours is, since they are all the same."

Will's left eye twitches.

Frederick takes this in stride. "Perhaps not," he says. "Ours is, admittedly, a bit barren."

"Is it still?" Hannibal asks.

Will is cutting into the fish – there is no real need for a knife. In his mouth, it melts. "This is delicious," he says, half muffled, and hopes to draw the conversation from his ineptitude.

Everyone makes hums of agreement, to which Hannibal only smiles. Frederick looks to Will and says, "No wonder you are fast improving."

"Will is a fine student," says Hannibal.

"Is he?" Bedelia asks softly, refilling her glass. "But you are a fine teacher as well, Hannibal." She looks across the table, and the light flickers in her eyes. Smiles at Will in something like tenderness. "He has had copious amounts of students – such as yourself, Will. And he ends up helping all of them in just such a way. When they have been sufficiently aided, he moves on to help yet another. It takes only a month or so."

Will stares at her.

Hannibal seems to notice, anew, a painting on the left wall.

Frederick raises an eyebrow. "How, uh, magnanimous of him."

At length, Hannibal takes note of the empty plates. He announces that he will shortly return with the main dish and asks for Will's assistance with the plates. Will assents wordlessly, taking his own and Frederick's, and departs with Hannibal into the kitchen. Once they are safely on the other side of the house, Will sets the plates in a stack near the sink and turns around, legs crossed, hands bracing himself on the counter.

Hannibal catches Will's gaze coolly. "Yes, Will?"

"Don't *yes Will* me," he hisses. "What is up with your wife? What does she think is going on between us?"

"I would think it obvious what she believes to be going on," he says, taking a small copper pot from the stove and stirring the thickened broth inside. It is livened by green onions and red chili, and he pours it deftly into the shallows of four plates on which there are already four whole sea basses. The eyes are milky, white. "You need not concern yourself with it."

"Why the hell not? I'm not one of your *students*, Hannibal."

"Of course not, Will."

Will strides over to the island where Hannibal stands. Looks up into the man's eyes with fervent determination. "Hannibal—"

"Will," Hannibal says, and raises a hand. He makes as if he would place it upon Will's shoulder. But instead, he lowers it, and gives a soft smile. "I know you are not. Her suspicions are her own."

Will is slightly cowed by this. That voice of serenade, of reassurance. Some psychiatrist's trick, surely. "But... but what if she gets *him* suspicious?"

"We will not allow that to happen. Now, come." He takes two plates, and leaves the room. Will sighs, takes the remaining two, and follows.

Upon re-entry to the dining room, Frederick and Bedelia seem to be getting along cordially; which Will takes to mean that Frederick has been floundering for some topic of conversation, and Bedelia has been liquidly indulging him. The plates are set before all and there is a vibrant hum of delight. Glasses are re-filled, though Will's has scantily been touched.

Frederick says, "I was just talking to Bedelia about the book-reading you and Hannibal have been engaged in. It is kind of nice to see you so interested in something."

Hannibal smiles at this, at Will.

Will shrugs lightly. "Well, yeah, I mean the first one was kind of tough." He half-laughs. "I had to ask Hannibal to choose something I'd have a better chance of relating to."

Bedelia nods sympathetically. "Ah, and how is the Harry Potter series?"

Will placates himself with images of stabbing her with his dessert spoon.

Frederick says, "As calming as genre can be, Will seems to be drawn innately to more literary pursuits." Eyes Will. "Whether he thinks himself capable or not."

The muscles in Will's shoulders loosen. He cannot help his smile and, beneath the table, nudges his left foot to Frederick's right.

"Any sort of reading, I find," begins Hannibal, "is conducive to relieving the surplus of ennui we may be currently experiencing. I've noticed it builds up relatively quickly the longer one stays at home. As such, we must endeavor to relieve Will regularly."

"Such a modern ailment," Bedelia murmurs. Will has stopped counting – is this her third glass? Fourth? She and Beverly Katz might make fast friends.

Frederick says, "We are but modern creatures. I want to make sure Will is as content as possible."

"I'm content," Will says, mostly to Frederick.

The conversation moves jaggedly to Hannibal's mastery of the culinary arts, and when and where he was able to gain such knowledge. On this, Bedelia seems to have little input and she, too, loses interest in antagonizing Will, for which Will is grateful. Will mostly listens to Frederick and Hannibal speak, and takes note.

Frederick looks to be quite casual, but Will sees some trickle of estimation in his gaze. He watches Hannibal closely, and watches how Hannibal watches Will. Will expected this. What he did not expect is how wooden he currently feels. Almost as if he is acting, and directing his gaze far from Hannibal at all costs. How odd, he thinks, for he has not even touched Hannibal. Yet there exists in him some pool of guilt which works its way, stream-like, into the rest of his body. Every movement he makes – knife against fork, a napkin-dab at his mouth – is choreographed to the tune of chastity.

But have I not been chaste? he wonders.

He should not feel this way. He has been very upfront with Hannibal, declaring he will not be cheating on his husband–

not again, not again

–and has not grazed one fingertip against him. Why, then, does he have to adjust himself in such a way? Where every action is de-colored of some hue once held in Hannibal's presence? Has he truly been flirting so voraciously, so ceaselessly?

Hannibal has, Will knows that much. He has, and yet his movements are eased. He looks at his wife with something not completely devoid of adoration. His countenance towards Frederick is warm. And to Will, he offers nothing but the most courteously removed of glances.

As if he does not spend his days thinking of fucking Will.

Marvelous. Truly, Hannibal is skilled. It must be, then, as Bedelia said. Countless students. And she is well aware of his proclivity towards tutelage.

So, Will thinks, with a not completely unamused expression. *He's a pro.*

Will tunes back into the conversation, peripherally aware he'd been silent for most of it.

Hannibal is asking Frederick, "And how did you two meet?"

Perhaps Will missed Hannibal and Bedelia's own story. He imagines it more like an arrangement than any romantic love-at-first-sight ordeal. Frederick looks at Will with a slight blush at his nose. Will snorts laughter and answers for him: "He was hitting on me where I worked one night, right before closing."

Frederick reddens completely. "Well, I think *hitting on* is a bit crude."

"Crude but apt," Will says, tapping Frederick's shoulder. "That whole night was really fun." His foot again moves to Frederick, and too his shin, rubbing languidly against the other man's calf.

"Yes," Frederick says in a throat-clear, "well, it was."

For the dessert course, Hannibal once again enlists Will. They walk into the kitchen in silence, and Hannibal wordlessly directs Will to assist in topping each hazelnut and chocolate clafoutis with spare toasted and chopped hazelnuts. Will does this with a trembling, unsure hand. He watches Hannibal's deft usage, and his gaze travels up to find the man staring over at him.

Will mutters, "Stop it."

Hannibal looks back towards the plates – Will does not miss the smile he wears. They take the four plates from the countertop and depart the kitchen. In the dimness of the hall, as Hannibal walks ahead of Will, he speaks softly, such that Will almost does not catch it: "You will have to trust me."

Will almost stumbles, but catches himself. "What—" he hisses, but breaks from further inquiry. They are inside the dining room and set the desserts down to much satisfied reception. Will takes his seat and notices, with the dessert wine glasses filled, Bedelia has lost much interest in the table at large. This suits Will.

Frederick is speaking to the clafoutis' airiness, its subtlety, and Will suddenly feels something crawling on him. Heavy and invasive. The lower floor of his stomach plummets, thinking there is some tarantula upon him— and yet.

When he looks up, he finds Hannibal's *eyes* on him. His infinite gaze which is, at this moment, wholly disconcerting and pregnant with purpose. Will feels it like a tidal wave of no cold sea but of lava, boiling, a strange incendiary whose flames lap at Will: his face, neck, the fine ridges of his collarbones. Will's eyes round for an instant, and he feels his pulse between his legs. He presses his lips together, releases them, wet.

At his side, Frederick is eyeing both of them, though furtively. Inly, Will begins to panic. The alarm bells which ring from each high place in his mind seem to sound for Ages, and yet when Hannibal looks away and responds to Frederick, it can only have been a few seconds. The dip at Will's collarbone is slick with sweat. Too, at his temples.

The rest of the meal passes without further incident. Though Will is cold to Hannibal, and does not make to engage him in conversation. He feels as if someone has released fistfuls of doubt back into the wavelength that exists between himself and Frederick.

Someone? he thinks wildly, incensed. *Not someone. Hannibal.*

Frederick is the one to say they must be going. His countenance is calm, pleased, but Will senses something under it, not unlike suspicion. Will cannot help himself cringing. He has felt such a way before when he was but a teenager. Riotous and amorous at fourteen, and his name written along high school bathrooms walls by fifteen. That November, he skipped classes often to sneak himself away with the seniors behind a local strip mall. He would allow himself to be taken against the brick walls. Behind the garbage cans, in narrow alleyways. He let them do it in any position they could origami him into, on one condition: they had to kiss. One afternoon, Will stumbled out from the alley, and his father's red pickup truck stood in the parking lot, running, the man's face grave in the window.

He felt his stomach in his feet. On the ride home, they said not one word to each other. The entire car filled with the piquant scent of sex. The worst of it, Will remembers, was the waiting. The waiting to get home. The waiting for punishment, for the disapproving gaze that, from that day until his father's last day, never wavered.

Will and Frederick stand at the doorstep. Bedelia has given Frederick a courteous nod and Will a passing glance, as if he is a fly who entered the house by mistake. She departs thereafter.

"It was lovely to have you over," Hannibal says. He smiles at Frederick. "I do hope we can see more of you."

Frederick returns the smile. Nods, and then eyes Will at his side. "I will have to arrange that we are all together again soon." After shaking Hannibal's hand, he tells Will he is going to unlock their door. He turns on his heel and departs.

Will waits for a moment. In the porch light, moths reawaken and flutter about his head. The light from the foyer too spills down onto the sandcrete and Will and Hannibal's shadows intertwine on the ground like a two-headed monstrosity. When Frederick is far enough away, he looks up through dark curls, with a sullenness that is cold as opposed to heated.

"Nice going, Superjerk." His voice low, almost despondent. "What was that all about? You think this is funny, don't you?"

"I asked you to trust me, Will."

"Trust you to what? Ruin my life?"

Hannibal raises a thin eyebrow. He eyes next door, at Frederick who has entered their house. Then, back at Will. His hand on the jamb of the door, and as he leans over Will, he says, "Do not be difficult. Now, I want you to listen closely. You are going to repeat what I say back to me, and then you will repeat it to your husband."

"Wh—"

"Listen."

*

Utterly ridiculous. Frederick cannot understand why he put up the pretense — the two of them are clearly deranged, and outwardly Bedelia is more so than Hannibal, which surely makes Hannibal the bigger worry. In truth, Frederick supposes there is nothing too upsetting about an irate lush — every neighborhood has one, particularly every neighborhood situated in the green folds of suburbia. When viewed through this lens, Bedelia is nothing more than mildly interesting scenery. A piece of topiary to be considered.

But Hannibal looked at Will as if he were meat. Devourable, and straightly by way of cause, suspectably delicious. It was as if he thought Frederick would not notice — it was

quick, but all abhorrent things are. In the dessert course, fleetingly, Hannibal looked through the dancing flames of candlelight, over brilliantly cooked clafoutis, and sent his corsair gaze to plunder the depths of Will's eyes, and the shallow cove of his throat, as if he would relish laying tongue to it and lapping at the scant traces of salt.

Frederick stands in their bedroom, furiously unbuttoning his shirt in the half-dark: there is but one lamp light burning near their bed, and the rest of the room is drenched in shadow. He stares out of their bedroom's wide window at the adjacent window, where it is dark with the curtains still drawn back from the day.

Frederick turns around as footsteps enter the room. Will stands in the threshold, staring back at him.

"Will, I don't like him," he says, keeping his feet firmly planted on the hard wood flooring. He swallows, exhales. He had hoped not to make issue. He was not going to – but that look. That *look*. "You were right at the beginning – he *is* weird. I mean, she is too. But he. Him."

Will tilts his head softly. He seems to be listening, considering. He crosses the floor, rounds the end of the bed. His gait a smooth glide. Eyes murky green in the stale light.

Frederick continues: "I know what you'll say; that I'm being unreasonable, that I'm making too much of the issue. I don't mind you having friends, Will, even attractive friends, and let us get it on the table now: Hannibal is nothing short of prepossessing. But I feel I must insist. The way he looked at you–"

Will bypasses Frederick for the nightstand. He flicks the light off, and the room is awash in pale blue light of the moon.

Frederick pauses. "Will, I'm still getting undressed."

Will turns back around. He takes his hands to the back of his shirt where the tag resides and pulls forward, over his darkly curled head. Tosses it to the floor.

"How did he look at me?" Will asks.

Frederick is mute for a second – caught as he is in the red tracings along his husband's body. He refocuses on Will's face. "H-He looked at you, quite frankly, as if he wanted to fuck you, Will."

Will is giggling of all things. Frederick does not find this the least bit funny, and means to say so right up until Will comes to him quietly, takes his hand, and places it on the express rigidity within Will's shorts. Will sighs into his ear, placing their exposed chests together. Will's smooth, radiant skin against Frederick's which is lightly dappled with hair.

He murmurs, "The man is married to a woman. You are so worried with how other men see me, but that is not my concern. I want to know how my husband sees me." His voice takes on a lower tone, and he grips Frederick's hand harder. "Do you still think I'm a whore?"

Frederick gasps, and is overcome with guilt. As he was the morning after he said it. He tries to pull away, to look into Will's eyes, but Will does not allow it. He instead kneads Frederick's hand against him, which causes Frederick to shudder, and his own body responds quickly.

"Will," he says, "I don't— not at all. I was angry. I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to *be* sorry."

Frederick doesn't understand. He tries again to free himself from Will's embrace, and this time succeeds. Will kisses him when he pulls back, his mouth fervent and eager and wet, so wet. Their tongues press together, and Will's hands are spider-quick at Frederick's button and zipper. He shucks the shirt from Frederick's shoulders. The air conditioning is cool on his back.

"Will— Will, the window is—"

Will has one hand on his own shorts and frees himself from them. They pool at his ankles, followed by his boxers. He takes Frederick's shoulders in hand and turns him, fast, for the bed, walking him backward until the back of his knees hit the edge and he buckles, falling down into the cirrus sheets and covers. When he looks up he finds Will smiling, his body darkened by the soft outside light behind him, and around his side, Frederick can only see their neighbor's window standing open.

Will is atop him before he can protest again. Shoving him down into the mattress, his head in the down of the pillows, and his boxers are shorn from him, tossed off to the floor. Will is down again, flush against him, their bodies hard and soft in identical places, their mouths connecting, and Will is aquiver along the length of him, kissing as he had way back when, with so much teeth and viciousness that Frederick might think he is trying to fight instead of fuck.

As he places his hands to settle on Will's backside, palming the curve, he cannot help but once again be overcome with guilt. Will is moaning, whining, licking at him, and he thinks it is unfair for him to have withheld this for so long from Will.

He opens his eyes, and sees the red along Will's body. He swallows, and tries to ease Will back.

Will retracts himself without much pushing. He sits atop Frederick and says, lips swollen, "I *am* a whore. Yours."

"Christ, Will."

Will leans down low over Frederick's prone body. Licks and sucks at his lower lip while using one hand in the nightstand drawer and finagling from it a small plastic bottle of lubricant. It is new, unopened, and he tips it into his hand as if he has done this a thousand times, a thousand thousand. Frederick's hands run up and down the length of Will's thighs, prickling against light hairs, gripping where he knows Will likes to be gripped.

He tries not to look at the runes which are ablaze. The darkness in the room and the shadow of the glazing bars across his body highlight them. When Will is coating Frederick with one overly slick hand – Frederick shivers, his stomach tightening – and as he uses the same hand to two-finger himself – Frederick falls in love anew with the flutter of his eyelashes – those runes pulsate, like warning signs that stand at the end of the world:

Tread with caution.

You will fall here.

Will grips him again, and straightens his back. His eyes never leaving Frederick's. And as he sinks down, Frederick's mind spasms and produces addled bits of speech from that other voice, that which he uses with patients, and he cannot make it out, just random things – *coping mechanism* – that reach him on that sky-spire – *polymorphously perverse* – which is his mind, stretching into the blackness of space – *because of what he did, what he did, what he did* – and come in like beeps from satellites.

He is inside Will. He emits something of forfeit, a moan or thin cry, in place of all the things he wishes he could say right now. *I missed you* or *I love you* might be applicable, but he is incapable of such. And Will does not seem particularly capable of it either, for he is already moving like the ocean resides in his hips, in a slow and slightly desperate tempo, as if he has been starving and Frederick has just now thought to feed him.

Will is scorching hot and clamp-tight and Frederick knows he is not destined to last long at all. The only hope he has is looking at those runes, and too, the window which is wide open and he feels these things mix inside him, hoping they will stall his quickly approaching orgasm.

They do no such thing, foremost, and when Frederick looks from the window back up to Will, he thinks he is hallucinating even more. Will's body is shadow and those lines upon him look like fire, like a furnace is inside him and he is lighting himself with each snap of his hips, each prolonged moan which is loud, so loud. And his hair, all mass of curls about his head, and those two emeralds embedded in his skull. Frederick has seen photographs of such things, stone idols from cultures in Mozambique which depicted goddesses of full bounty and they lit up at night and they incited awe, elder awe, terror, abject horror, and love and fealty and all things which spark in one when presented with such an insane and resplendent deity.

Will makes a high-pitched cry like he is in pain and suddenly Frederick's chest and chin are dripping wet, and Frederick grips Will to still him; his toes curl and he comes into Will with more urgency than he has ever known.

There it is – that smile, that famous smile that Will always gives after Frederick finishes. Lofty, and self-satisfied. He collapses forward with an airy sigh and kisses into Frederick's throat, haphazardly de-joining them and rolling off onto the side. He is breathing words that Frederick cannot make out. Perhaps they hold no meaning.

Through their window, and into the next, Frederick watches. He strokes Will's pale flank lightly as he does so. At the neighbor's darkened window, there is a flash, as something passes. Frederick winces. Perhaps it was a shadow over the moon.

Will's wet cooing at his ear.

Perhaps it was their neighbor. Frederick doesn't know – he is too far into some rosy afterglow to discern it. But he turns and looks at Will: the length of his body red and white, his thick eyelashes, and Frederick cannot help himself, and he places himself to Will, and in a moment, he places himself inside Will, and after that the window doesn't matter, or perhaps it does, perhaps it does.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes.

Terrified

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This happened seven years ago:

Frederick and Will married quickly. In the aftermath of an engagement that was merely two weeks long, the entire ceremony took half an hour. Will's assertion was, in essence, why wait? Will's parents were dead by then, and the entire Chilton clan still referred to homosexuals as the gays. *Leave everyone else out of it*, Will'd said. *I just want it to be you and me.*

On this, Frederick relented. He never much cared for the idea of big weddings. His main concern was pleasing Will, a concern which he had tirelessly pursued for the past year as soon as he realized Will meant to stay around. He'd gotten so far. After the papers were signed, it still felt unsure, unreal, the ring on his hand, the ring on Will's. At the airport, Will forced him to take a dare. Frederick, high still on the feeling of *I do* on his lips, accepted. In the vast lobby, amidst the muffled voice over the intercom, the clicking of shoes and rolling of bag wheels on the glossed floors, Frederick called his mother.

I'm married, he'd said.

What? What do you mean? To who?

Frederick looked back over his shoulder. Will had his suitcase in one hand, and giggled wildly into the other. His curls were longer then, and slightly lighter brown. He nodded in excitement.

Frederick turned back to the phone. *To some guy named Will.*

His mother paused. *Wait*, she said. *What?*

Frederick hung up. He and Will dashed to their flight. And they could not stop laughing. The flight was long, but Will was inexhaustible. He chattered and pointed out of the window, his arm in the face of an increasingly irate old woman. Upon their arrival to the main island of Hawaii, Will became riotous. He shouted at the ocean, visible from the airport, which upset and annoyed others. He looked confused when a man at the hotel on Punalu'u Beach took their bags for them. Riding up the glass elevator, Frederick watched him and realized no one had done such things for Will. Taken him anywhere, showed him anything beyond mainland America. Already, Frederick was calculating and planning ahead for their first year anniversary.

When left alone in the room, it was already night. Lights near the beach shone through their ceiling-to-floor windows which covered the whole of one wall. Beyond the black sand of the beach lay the vast and churning sea. Will's body silhouetted by the dark and the blue light. Frederick came to stand next to him.

Do you like it? he asked.

Wordless for a moment at least. Will finally turned around, and his expression was obscured in the dark. He pressed a small kiss to Frederick upper lip, and dipped down quickly to grab his suitcase. He said that he'd return soon, and ran into the bathroom. Frederick quirked an eyebrow, and sat down on the plush bed. Noted how he sank in. He turned one nightstand lamp on and kicked off his shoes. They both knocked to the side and the bathroom door opened again. Frederick looked up.

Frederick thought he must've been dreaming. Surreal. Will: brown curls soft and loose around his ears as though recently brushed. Legs long and white and lean. Clad in nothing but the sheerest of short robes – black with printed gold leaves like an autumn night. It covered his arms completely, and ended just to mid-thigh. Left a wide and deep-plunging neckline to his sternum. He moved towards Frederick, bare feet through the overly-padded cream carpet.

Surely Frederick must have been asleep somewhere in Boston. In his apartment, with patient files on the floor around him. His phone ringing off the hook. And when he woke up, he would be miserable, for the last year would have been a lie, just a lonely young man's active mind and brainwaves and colors and feels and smells. He kept waiting to wake up, even as Will put his hands in Frederick's hair and emitted soft laughter as Frederick wrapped his arms around Will's waist. Pushed his face into Will's stomach and inhaled him, so deeply he might've asphyxiated. He let his hands, shaking, move under the silken fabric and cup Will's backside fully. They both made a similar sound.

With a jagged exhale, Frederick pulled him down into the bed. The windows were wide open, and even the light stood on, but at that moment Frederick didn't care. The thought that someone might see them in the highest room of the hotel was a non-sequitur. He has always maintained that that night was and would always be the best sex of his life. That nothing could ever compare. And nothing ever has – save last night.

*

In graduate school, one of Frederick's abnormal psychology professors had a habit of waxing philosophical during lectures. Once, he stopped the table's heated discussion of a case study, and said, idly looking out of the rain-streaked window, "Why *is* it that the highest forms of art evoke a level of terror?"

They stared at him, Frederick included.

He shrugged at the silence. "It's because sublime emotions take one out of oneself, and therein lies a kind of base horror. It's truly disconcerting to be confronted with emotions, experiences, so deep that they are universal. To come into contact with them, at the root, is terrifying. We see it in modern psychology so much, in so many variations, that we have to label it, catalogue it, but what it is, at its core, is recognition. Abject terror at one's own humanity. This is what we call insanity."

Frederick rolled his pen against the desk. He glanced, too, at that same window and a soaked leaf clung to the wet pane.

*

On Monday morning, Will is banging on Hannibal's door. It is barely thirty minutes after their spouses have left the little inlet of Sol Terrace and are both miles away in their respective offices. Hannibal takes his time coming to the door. Will taps his foot against the sandcrete stone.

The door opens, and Will's smile blossoms with it. The sun pouring down from on high to warm the open faces of roses. Hyacinths. Morning glories. Will is an array of petals, bruised petals, his neck covered in lovebites and suck marks. He lengthens the lines of his body, holds his head high to allow Hannibal full view. As he did last night.

"My," Hannibal says, still in pajama bottoms and a red sweater thrown over. He regards Will with something like barely-contained pride. "Aren't we a little satisfied?"

"Well, you should know," Will says, sliding in past Hannibal. He makes his way to the kitchen, hearing Hannibal's bare feet padding behind him. The front door swinging closed. Will finds the coffee pot still warm. "God," he says, taking two mugs from the cupboard, "I can't believe it worked." He takes the glass pot from the machine and begins pouring. First one, then the other. "I mean, I have to say I was pretty skeptical. I didn't know what I was going to do if it *didn't* work, since you boxed me into a corner with your weird staring." He pauses, replaces the pot. The kitchen smells of hazelnut. He comes to Hannibal, his face lit in sun, eyes a grass green. "Wait, that's not true. I'd've come over here and decked you if you got me into trouble." He is smiling and hands Hannibal one of the mugs.

Hannibal's eyebrows rise pleasantly. "I believe I would have enjoyed that just as much as this."

Will snorts laughter, sashaying past and into the hall, towards the dining room. "Superman's depraved. Got it."

They two find themselves in the dining room and Will is so overcome with happiness and relief that he cannot think to be embarrassed about chattering to Hannibal. Indeed not; for how, now, could he ever? The man *saw* him. Both of them, to be precise, and though Will had initially felt slightly guilty upon waking, that this occurred without Frederick's knowledge or consent, he realized that if he truly abhorred the idea, he would have simply pushed Will away and shut the blinds. Yet he did no such thing. In Will's mind, this absolves him of any responsibility.

Will the Blameless.

"I feel like I've been walking in a desert," Will says after a long slurp of coffee. He looks past Hannibal, out into the sun-streaming morning. The world is so bright. "And finally found water."

Hannibal is eyeing him with a soft smile. "Let this not be but an oasis."

"I'd sooner die!"

"The door is open for you, Will. All you need do is walk through it."

Will scoffs, cracks his neck. "I am *running* through it, trust me." He pauses, and touches idly at one of the marks Frederick made at the left juncture of his neck and shoulder. It was done in the second round last night, when Frederick pushed into him, his arms hooked behind Will's knees, folding Will until he was blessedly deep. His breath on Will's throat. Then the bite, the suck. "So," Will sighs, looking over again, "how did you know that would work? Is it some psychiatrist thing?"

"Something like."

Will pushes the nearly empty mug out of the way. His mouth tastes of coffee. He leans down, elbows sliding along the wooden surface, until his arms lie flat and head rests to the side as he stares up and over at Hannibal. "How strange," he muses, "that psychiatrists can do that to each other."

Hannibal smiles. Sets his mug down. "If they couldn't, there would be no way for them to help each other. Everyone could benefit from some introspection. Some clarity."

"Have you ever gone to a therapist before?"

"I have."

"And?"

"And what?"

"*Hannibal*."

He lifts his shoulders, drops them. "I found it helpful. Psychiatry is not simply a trick of education. Some silent, solemn board of directors which imparts knowledge to those with degrees. It is someone holding a mirror up to you, and instructing you to gaze into the eyes of your reflection. Though what one finds there can be terrifying."

Will listens sedately. The wood is cool but warming under his skin. He lifts his head and half his curls are matted from where he rested. Hannibal looks at the length of his body as if he is not wearing clothes. Will supposes he should acclimate to this now – he opened a door last night, for all three of them. They all must walk through.

What waits in the next room?

Will says, "Sounds fun."

*

Nights are different now.

Frederick comes home from work and barely has gotten in the door before Will is on him; he is already half naked and his body burns with the runes, which have yet to disappear. Frederick's tie is haphazardly undone, his suit jacket tossed to the floor. Will unbuttons his

shirt, maybe makes it to three or four before he grows increasingly unruly, and settles for undoing Frederick's slacks.

Frederick is on autopilot. Will's scent is of lust and plumeria, which brings Frederick to some place where he is himself and yet he is not himself. He hears Will's usual murmurings but in surround-sound and coming in clearer. He used to think Will wasn't saying much of anything. But he catches them now, deep and melodic, and faraway as if through the curved insides of a seashell:

now Ricky right now

missed you it feels so good

You liked it, didn't you? Didn't you? Didn't you?

ah fuck right there again like that

The voice almost doesn't sound like Will in some cases, but none of this shocks Frederick out of that place he has found, which exists in three small moments. One, when Will is spread open for him. Two, when Frederick is inside him. Three, at the point just before orgasm when everything is crystal and pink and he almost cannot breathe.

The bedroom window has been open for days. Frederick looks out of it sometimes, in the middle of the night when their bed is drenched in sex. Will sleeping contentedly next to him. His face young in the moonlight. And Frederick sees that Hannibal's window is closed by this time, though when Will and Frederick first fall to bed in the evenings, it is wide open. Will could close it if he wanted to. Frederick could close it if he wanted to.

But he doesn't. The thought of it open makes him feel like bugs are crawling beneath his skin. His stomach tightens, his head thrums. Ever since the weekend, Frederick has been a being of static, frozen in a frenzy of sex. He hasn't bothered to try and decipher what any of it means, perhaps is even frightened to. He resides inside himself, shelled by many layers, and Will's body alone brings him to the forefront.

This morning, Will made French toast which was overly buttery and slightly acrid. And in the evening, there was a whole roasted Dover sole which he forgot to debone. Sex lasted hours.

Frederick lies in bed with the light of the moon over him. Will snores softly at his side. The air conditioner kicks on and the whir fills the room. Frederick needs to get up, he needs to get out of the house, he needs to do it right now or he might cry.

Red-eyed, he rises from bed very slowly. Unwraps himself from Will, and looks down at his shaded face, the red fingertips that graze the curve of his chin. In his dreams, he wrinkles his nose, then relaxes his face again. Frederick leaves the room.

He pulls on jeans and a grey hoodie which he rolls up to his elbows. He thinks this one is Will's – a perk of their similar size. At the front door, he wryly eyes the racehorse

staring down at him, toes on his brown loafers, and softly shuts the front door behind himself as he departs.

The night air is warm with the occasional breeze. Leaves shake softly in sugar maples and hollies. The grasses roll, freshly shorn. Lampposts burn bright, and Frederick, as he meets with the end of his driveway, already feels better. He breathes in deep: the summer perfume on the wind, and something that miraculously smells of chlorine though there is no pool for miles, he thinks. Perhaps Luna homes have pools.

Frederick tucks his hands in the front pockets of the hoodie and strolls down the sidewalk. His shadow moves over the lawns. He makes it to the second house down, that which he believes to be the Lounds residence, and suddenly looks up at the moon in the sky. It seems directly above him and over-full. As if it might burst and spill electric blue liquid on Frederick's head. He stares up, pupils widening, and when he looks down again, he is dizzy.

He cannot simply stand in the lamplight at whatever ungodly hour this is. He moves between two of the houses which loom in the night. Into the grassy ravine that separates each, and silently to the left across the backyards.

This, he finds fun. Each backyard is largely similar to the last; the same tiled patios and black metal benches. But the Loundses have bug-zappers set around the perimeter, which are blackened at the moment. From here, he continues left. The shadows of the trees move over him and the moon ever follows. The further from the house he walks, the better he feels. Like some weight is slowly dropping from him and he leaves it behind. If this is how *he* feels, he imagines being cooped up there all day must be painful for poor Will.

Yet, he remembers, Will is not cooped up there all day. He has Hannibal, and all his vast knowledge at his disposal.

Frederick pauses in another backyard. A cricket moves over the toe of his loafer. It chirps, and hops, diminishes into the grass. A few feet ahead of him shines a box of light, appearing as suddenly as the cricket departed. Frederick squints, then looks up at the window from where the light shines. His murky green eyes widen, deepen, as Beverly walks into view, her long white back to him. Her hair a tousle of wet black streaks against her shoulders, and she discards the towel with which she'd been rubbing at her ears. From this low and to-the-side angle, Frederick cannot see the details of the room, but she pauses, staring in front of her. Perhaps a mirror. She stands still for a long time before stretching her hands up over her head and reticulating. All at once, in ballerina fashion, she makes a nimble turn. Frederick jolts at the flash of her eyes and his movement amongst the still foliage causes her to shriek. Her hands fly to cross at her chest, haphazardly covering herself, and she continues to yell as Frederick makes a muffled cry of alarm and jerks himself back the way he'd come.

He has never been a very skilled runner. In high school, he briefly made an attempt with the cross country team. Practices were grueling and he primarily sequestered himself to places in the shade. He runs now the way he never did back then: as if his life depends on it. He can, strangely, hear his old coach's voice in his head now, cheering from the tiled patios as he sprints past: *Put your ass into it, Chilton!*

Frederick makes it into the back door of his house; his back up against the coolness of the door. He is cold-sweating and his neck is fire-hot. He swallows, and lingers in the kitchen, gulping down a glass of water from the sink. He regulates his breathing, and undresses when he ascends the stairs. Quietly, he deposits himself into bed, on the side closest to the window. Will looks not to have woken, but when he feels Frederick's body move anew, he snuggles in closer.

His arms move around Frederick's torso, his chest, which undulates with the effort of running.

Will murmurs, eyes still closed, "Bad dream?"

Frederick slowly exhales through his nose. Places his mouth at Will's dark hair and he wonders if Beverly saw him and not just some shadowy figure. If she did, they will have no choice at all but to move. He says, "Terrible."

Will's voice is sweet when he is sleeplogged. Frederick has always loved this about him. He sighs before losing consciousness again: "Poor Ricky."

*

It is 4 PM nearing the end of the week and the weather has day-long been gorgeous. Will complained to Hannibal about all the time they spend inside. Thus, they now sit in the early evening purple and oranges, at Hannibal's backyard patio. Will considers his backyard the same as everyone's, as if there is no separation of property at all. He cannot tell if he finds this rather quaint or not really what they pay so much money for.

Frederick. What Frederick pays so much money for.

Hannibal sits on the metal bench, one leg crossed over the other. His white shirt soaks in the sunset hues. And he watches Will as he has come to, which is not without a bit of unbridled wonder and awe.

Will sits cross-legged in the grass, his copy of *The God of Small Things* in the lap of his jeans. One curl wrapped tightly around a thin finger. "That Lemondrink man thing totally blindsided me," he says, frowning into the inked pages. "I mean, what even – and you knew that was in here!"

"My apologies, Will. I did not know it would unsettle you so."

"Oh, fuck you." Will smirks, rolling his eyes to Hannibal's smile. "I'm not unsettled. It's just unreal. The way it comes out of nowhere like that. No foreshadowing, no nothing."

"And how would you foreshadow such a thing?"

"Don't ask me."

Hannibal makes a vague motion with his hand. "It brings about an organic sense in the narrative. Manufactured plot devices are a necessity at points, but a sublime moment happens completely apart from the storyline. That's why there is no foreshadowing." He

pauses, and leans slightly forward. "For instance, if someone is robbed in their home in the middle of the night, is there a foreshadowing to that event? No. It simply occurs."

"So, random."

"With purpose, yes."

A firefly rises from the grass, and lazily rests in Will's curls. It blinks on and off. Will gazes up, as if he could see it. "And that purpose is?"

Hannibal gazes at the bruises on his neck. "To unsettle you."

*

By Friday, Frederick figured he was safe. When there was no angry mob at his door after the events which occurred at approximately 1 AM on Thursday morning, he was sure Beverly either told no one or wasn't completely sure there was anyone to report on to begin with. Frederick weighed these options during breakfast with Will, filing paperwork at the hospital, listening to patients, and returning for dinner with Will. He thought the former more likely and cringed for it; it is not uncommon, for one, specifically a woman, to feel violated and keep it to herself.

The thought kept him in a sort of limbo, in which all the things that have plagued him this week floated around in a nether space where nothing really mattered: these things which, once given weight again, would fall atop him seemed inconsequential. Like the pause before a plummet from the highest point of a roller-coaster. The little flop of the stomach. Suspended in midair and looking at the miles one has to fall. Wondering what impact would be like.

Would it hurt?

Would one die instantly?

Or would one linger for an instant, only that, in a broken heap in unimaginable agony?

As Frederick walked to his car this morning, Jack came jaunting up to him from his own lawn, through the placid street, and met Frederick at the Escalade.

"Hey, hey," he called.

Frederick waited to be punched, or handcuffed. Could cops punch people? He'd seen it on television.

Jack stood before him, eyebrows raised, hands up. "You'll never guess what's happened!"

Listening to it accounted by someone else was nigh surreal. Frederick could see himself that night as Jack told him: Beverly was getting undressed for bed, post-shower, and turned to look out of her window. She saw the pants and shoes of someone standing in her

yard, and the figure moved when discovered, running away. She screamed after him, but he did not look back.

Jack looked at Frederick and told him to be careful, especially with Will. He said they would all have a talk about this at the upcoming Neighborhood Association meeting, and with that he left. Called back from his lawn: "Tell Will I say hi!"

Frederick contemplates this from his office. The curtains dragged shut, the room stuffy and full of dust motes that are just barely visible in a few errant rays of sun. Frederick has declined all patient visits for the day. He's told Bailey he is exceedingly busy.

And he is busy.

As he sits in the leather expanse of his desk chair, head turned to the side, he feels a prickling sensation all along his body. He feels constricted and free-floating all at once. His stomach and heart flopping as one. In his mind's eye, he sees Will beneath him, the cold blue of moonlight from the open window along his fire-branded body. He sees him in the home of Hannibal, taking note on risotto and pancakes. Hannibal's wine-dark gaze upon him, crawling the length of his body as he stands in a sunlit kitchen.

Dimly, Frederick supposes that is why he has been so territorial with Will's neck. The man is *marked*, all shades of blue and purple from shoulder to chin, a few cerise teeth punctures. Frederick has never been so rough with him. Will is adoring of it, and encouraging, and does he know that Frederick is doing this as some childish pissing contest? To show Hannibal that Will is spoken for?

Is the ring on his hand not enough?

Would that have happened months ago if Will'd had suck marks on his neck?

Does he— could he—

Frederick bites at his knuckle.

There's nothing wrong with liking to watch. Sometime long ago, Will said that to him. Looking up at him with lust-glazed eyes and himself in hand. Seconds later, spilling across the cushions.

But Frederick knows he cannot stand by and watch this. That feeling of the precipice is too real, too close, and so he does the only thing he can do. He opens his laptop and commences to a search of therapists in the Baltimore area.

*

Sun dapples the living room of Hannibal's house. He sits on the far end of the couch across from a vacant fireplace, and Will lounges against the other side. His body folded up, head tilted completely back over the armrest, and he stares at a clock on the wall. His neck is sore, and his eyes water from the angle, but he does not wish to look at Hannibal.

He says, softly, "His name was Matthew. I met him the same way I met my husband. Just, happened to come up to the coffee place I worked at. Even after marrying, I didn't stop working, I— I guess I didn't want to come across as a gold-digger. But you know. He was good looking, and persistent. He saw my wedding ring and all. I never hid it." Will drums blunt fingertips upon his breastbone. "I pretty much told him to fuck off the first day. I guess maybe I said it in a flirty way. He came back the next day, and the day after that. My coworkers kept seeing him and one, I remember, she told me I should fuck him to get him to go away. I thought it would've probably worked since that was probably all he wanted. But still, I didn't. And I kept coming home to Frederick and our maid like everything was natural. Then one day I came home later. I don't know why, really. I've been asking myself ever since — why *him*? Why did I do it? But I don't have an answer. I just did." He clears his throat. The clock keeps ticking. "And the night it happened, I thought I must've smelled like sex or something, but Frederick didn't notice. He kissed me and asked me about my day. Then, Matthew came back the next day, and I took him behind the building and cursed him out. Can you believe that? You should have seen the look on his face, like I'd legitimately hurt his feelings. I mean, I liked it, what we did. In the backseat of his car, with my toes almost touching the roof. It was... it was thrilling. But I didn't think I could keep it up. And he kept saying crazy things like he loved me, he loved me. I told him I never wanted to see him again. So finally, he left." Will's left foot is falling asleep from its place beneath the right, and he clenches his toes. "I thought that'd be the end of it. I don't really know what happened, just that it seemed to take no time at all. Maybe he followed me home, or something. Two days later, I came home expecting a kiss and to be asked about my day. But I could tell Frederick'd been crying. And he asked me, real soft: *Who is Matthew Brown?*" He digs his toes into the dip between cushions. "First I denied it. And it just seemed to make things worse, so I told him that it was just once and it was stupid and it didn't mean anything. And he just looked at me, like he didn't know me. Then I just started sobbing and begging him not to leave me. Didn't recognize my own voice. I sounded like someone's lost little kid." Will's throat has become scratchy and he pauses for a long time, in which time the clock continues, and a car goes by in the street. There is a young-voiced shout from Luna, that secret place beyond their backyards.

Finally, Will straightens. With some effort, he pulls his head up and his brain is swimming. His shoulders and neck are sore from the position and the room is blurred for a moment until finally all settles and Hannibal is sitting calmly apart from him, eyes shaded in the afternoon light. His lips just slightly wet.

Will shakes his head slowly. "Even though I was begging at the time, like my *life* depended on it, I knew there was no real danger of him leaving me. In the back of my mind, I knew."

Hannibal says, "And now here you are."

Another car goes by. It looks like Kade's, and rolls into the dip of the cul-de-sac. Will bites his lower lip as he returns his gaze to Hannibal. "Is this what therapy is like?"

"Yes, Will. This is what therapy is like."

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy.

Recovery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The waiting room is soaked in light blues and purples – calming colors, relaxing and cool, though Frederick feels anything but relaxed. The glossed magazines fanned on the table, the sonata raining down from an unseen speaker, the plush chairs, they do nothing for him. Perhaps it is the others who set him on edge. Couples, three at present, sit in various positions around the room, and each of them look more unhappy than the last. One man touches his wife's knee lightly, and she quickly turns away, recrossing her legs. Another couple continuously sends Frederick questioning glances. The third are too busy crying to notice each other or anyone else.

Frederick finds this beyond depressing, but he's already made the appointment, and feels he cannot back out now. The receptionist, who sits behind a tall walnut desk at the corner, sends him sly glances as well. He is the only lone patient here. He eyes his watch. He has a full hour in the midday which he allows himself for lunch. Possibly he could spend the entire day out and nothing would go awry, but the tugging sensation of responsibility keeps him tied to decorum. He waits.

This Dr. Du Maurier was highly lauded online, and easily one of the most expensive therapists in the downtown area. Thus, Frederick's choice was easily made. Long ago, his father told him that you get what you pay for. Frederick has been paying ever since.

The door to the office opens. A man and woman shuffle out, their eyes ringed red, and behind them walks a woman of smooth and familiar gait. Blonde hair curling effortlessly over one shoulder. Light blue dress wrapped around her form, and one golden bracelet at her left wrist. As the other two walk over towards reception, Frederick pauses standing by his seat, mouth slightly agape.

"Frederick," Bedelia calls softly, nodding to him. She opens the door wider.

Dr. Du Maurier? And yet. Frederick thought their last name was Lecter. That's what Will had said. Hannibal Lecter. Frederick begins to sweat and feels this highly inappropriate. Though she must've known he would come from her appointment log. He made it the day prior.

"Frederick," she says again. The other couples begin looking at him now.

Frederick clears his throat lightly and nods, crossing the low-colored carpet. He eyes her quickly, moves past her into the wealth of the office which is lined completely on one wall by giant windows. They look out onto Baltimore proper, the garage parking structures and, against the overcast sky, a plane streaking from Baltimore-Washington International. There are two seats facing each other in front of the windows; one, a black leather armchair and the other of similar fabric and make is a loveseat. Frederick remains standing as the door shuts.

"Du Maurier," he says, watching her form move around him. "I didn't know. I thought—"

"I kept my name for business purposes," she says, as if she has had to answer this a thousand times. She possibly has. She takes the seat closest to the door, and calmly crosses her bare legs. The dress fabric falls an inch up her white thigh. "Please, have a seat, Frederick."

He doesn't. "It's just, this might be a bit inappropriate, don't you think?"

"Why is that?"

"Well, we— we're neighbors, and—" He searches. Friends? Certainly not. "Acquaintances."

"If your concern is that I might divulge what you say here to your husband, perhaps, strike it from thought. Not only am I very private with my patients, I don't much care for your husband. Therefore, I would not betray you to him."

Frederick wonders if that is supposed to make him feel better. He sighs and makes his way to the loveseat across from her. Takes in the sight of her, her off-cast gaze, and sighs. "You know, you disliking Will might also make this doctor-patient relationship a bit—precarious."

"Mm. No, I don't think so."

Frederick shakes his head.

Bedelia leans forward the slightest bit. "This room exists apart from our home lives. You should take this to be a world away, where you can voice grievances and work through your side of problems."

"My side?"

"Every marriage has two sides. And yet it is in guise as a single, united entity, which is misleading. This causes many problems, and wonders and worries. It can make one feel as if they are the only one in the world with such difficulties. But you can see—" She gestures towards the waiting room door. "You are not alone. So, Frederick, I encourage you to stay. You may be as open as you like here."

Frederick rubs the palms of his hands against his knees. And, previously leaned forward, begins to settle back into the seat. He looks at the skyline, and the shadows it casts on Bedelia's face. He agrees.

*

"You guys ever use that?"

Will nods his head towards the corner of the wide master bathroom. There sits a burnished jet tub which stands opposite the glass-walled shower. Will sits between the twin

sinks on the counter, his back against the mirror. Straight across is the window which looks into his own identical bathroom.

"On occasion," Hannibal says, lingering at the sink to Will's right. "Though not much recently."

Will hums, tilting his head back until the crown touches the mirror. He lightly arches. The room is warm, steamed, from the hot water running at the shower previously. It is freshly cleaned, along with the sinks and mirror, though Will knows he is smudging it with his hair and scalp.

"Maybe I should draw Frederick a bath for when he gets home at nights," Will says, as if to the ceiling. The dimmed overhead lights peer down at him. "He's really not a bath person. But he's seemed a bit stressed lately. Bad dreams. So maybe it'd help."

"Well, feel free to use this one while you decide."

Will laughs, and he straightens, curves, until he sits with elbows upon his knees. "Oh," he says, smirking, "you think you are *so* smart."

Hannibal does not smile but there is an airiness at his expression. He shrugs a bit and pulls to him a small red lacquered box that sits on what Will assumes is Bedelia's side of the counter. It is cluttered in cosmetics. A shade of eye shadow that Will reads upside-down as: black forest truffle. Will inly rolls his eyes. The box Hannibal opens is not of cosmetics but jewelry, and their shimmer reflects in Will's eyes.

"I merely wish to aid you in any way I can," he says.

"Uh huh."

Hannibal raises a scant eyebrow over at Will, to which Will shrugs. He places a prodding finger into the box of gold and silver and all manner of baubles. Swirls them around. He imagines her going into the box to see the mess he's made of it; imagines her thinking it one of Hannibal's students. Though perhaps Will is the only one at the moment. He never sees anyone else come and go. And he has been watching.

His hand slips into a gold bangle. He has seen Bedelia wear these at dinner this weekend past. When it settles against his wrist, he holds it up to the light.

Hannibal's eyes glint. "It looks better on you."

Will grins, though tries to hide it. He places his hand at his side, looks off, and kicks his feet in a pleased manner. "You are a *terrible* husband. What are we going to do with you?"

"What, indeed."

"I know it looks better on me," he chirps. "But you shouldn't say it."

Hannibal's gaze is crawling along Will's skin – he can feel it, on the pulse at his neck. It feels like being dabbed with a hot-damp towel. Stroked from behind his ear to his collarbone. Hannibal says, "We're alone right now." His voice echoes slightly. "Shouldn't friends be open with each other?"

"Mhmm," Will hums, smiling. Still refusing to look Hannibal's way. "Friends. You're so shameless."

"Interesting accusation coming from someone who has been so wantonly unfaithful."

That catches Will, and he whips his head around to face Hannibal's easy countenance. Will's curls bounce, then settle. He rolls his shoulders back, raises the bedizened wrist. "Don't pretend like you aren't worse than I am," he says, green eyes aglimmer. He lowers his voice to a conspiratory whisper. "And don't pretend that you don't still indulge."

"I pretend nothing."

Will snorts lightly. "You're a bad influence." He shakes the bangle off, lets it splash into the puddle of gold in the box. "I've watched that show on TV, *Intervention*. You seen it? It's like, all these addicts, and the one I saw most recently was about this guy who, before the show, actually tried to get clean. But he started hanging around with all these other addicts; they tried to get him using again. Well, not tried. They just used *around* him. And being around it so much, he couldn't help himself." Will's feet slowly stop kicking. "So he relapsed."

"And is he in recovery by the end?"

Will nods. "He went. Everything turned out all right." He raises an eyebrow at Hannibal. "The amount of convincing it took was pretty ridiculous."

"One cannot help their urges."

"They can if they don't want to break their loved ones' hearts." The lights in the room suddenly seem too bright. Will squints. "You should have seen his family. The way they cried."

Hannibal watches Will for a long moment. His continual blinking. He leans in the slightest bit and says, "To an addict, twelve steps can be as the Swiss Pyramid."

"Good thing I'm not an addict then," Will says, an edge of ire to his tone. He shakes himself, arches, and slides off of the counter until his feet touch the stone tiles, groaning a bit as he does so. He is not unaware that this makes some impression on Hannibal, as the weight of his stare heavies. Will walks to the bathroom door, swinging himself around the corner with his hand on the jamb. "What should I make for dinner?"

*

Saturday evening and the lampposts have just flickered on outside. Frederick watches each as they come to life from the window of Kade's living room. It begins down at the right end of

the cul-de-sac, and each seems to light each in undulation. They end at Hannibal and Bedelia's home. Their lights are on and they seem to make no movement towards exiting the house. It's just as well.

Frederick turns his attention back to the bustling living room; it is filled with their neighbors, and smells strongly of frankincense. There are burning oil lamps on the coffee table, replacing any snacks that were offered last time.

"Ooh," says Beverly, lounging in the nearby recliner, "I like those, Kade. Are they from Bed Bath and Beyond?"

"Of course not – they're from Australia."

Beverly rolls her eyes.

Kade seems to notice this but instead goes to the door to allow in a few others – stragglers, as the appointed meeting time has been passed by five minutes. Frederick sits near the right armrest of the larger sofa, with Will at his side, comfortably leaned into him. Their hands clasped securely between them. They both smell of sex and Frederick is glad for the oil burners that they may cover some of it. Will wears a dark spot on his neck the size of a thumbprint and chats to Phyllis on his other side, sporting it proudly.

Frederick feels anxious. It is in the air, as much as the frankincense. Added to by Kade's earlier rebuttal to Brian as to why there were no snacks. *This isn't a time for snacks*, she'd said. *This is a time of crisis. Snacks! What's the matter with you?*

Brian said, *I'm hungry, that's what's the matter with me.*

It's only been mentioned in passing – Frederick figured he should. On the way here, with Will's fingers laced firmly in his own, he relayed it to Will as Jack had relayed it to him. With remove, as if he too was shocked by this. Will did not seem overly bothered. He giggled, wrinkled his nose. His green eyes fiery in the setting sun.

Kade comes to sit before them, hurriedly waving her hands about and clearing her throat.

"We must come to order," she says.

"Kade," Phyllis murmurs, "this isn't some dark council. Just say what you need to say."

Brian and Freddie snort, slapping hands over their mouths. Jack looks up, aside.

Kade ignores these reactions. She simply straightens her posture, rolls her shoulders back. Motions towards Beverly in the recliner. "We have a lot to discuss. Beverly, why don't you begin? Tell us what happened."

Frederick doesn't think he can bear hearing it a third time. But he stills, looks placidly at her. Beverly, for taking a long lock of black hair from her face, too looks beleaguered. She has most probably retold this to each person present. Yet, dutifully, she does so again.

Frederick watches her as she speaks to the quiet of the room. The shadows in the hollow of her collarbone, the dip of her shirt. The shadows there which were blindingly white through her window. Her thin figure in the lamplight.

Frederick sullen. He did not mean it. Yet look at all it has wrought.

When she finishes, Kade looks as if she herself has been accosted. Shakes her head in low sweeping motion, hands clasped betwixt her breasts. "The most vile of atrocities," she says.

Beverly frowns. "I didn't say all that."

"Jack," says Kade, ignoring her once more, "it's your duty to apprehend the culprit."

"Pretty hard to do with just a description of a shadow."

"*Jack.*"

"What?" he cries. Turns back to Beverly. "Can you give me anything? Did you see a face – anyone you might know? It usually is with these things."

Freddie recoils. "Agh, I knew it. This place is way too nice to not have a few perverts running around."

Frederick tangles in silence. Will is giggling a bit, and slightly nuzzling under Frederick's chin. He is in a heavy-lidded afterglow, such that he asked Frederick if he *had* to come to the meeting. He was wrapped half in their sheets, the setting sun lighting his body gold and his runes strobing. Semen on his stomach and between his thighs. Frederick said he probably should.

He simply shrugged in response and looked out the window towards their neighbor's house. Perhaps Hannibal is putting rampant notions in Will's head. Frederick prefers, at least over the weekend, to keep him close by. Too much Hannibal could not be good for anyone, much less someone so impressionable as Will.

It has struck him recently: What do those two talk about all day long? Could they possibly confer on their open windows?

Frederick wonders.

"–Hannibal," Brian is saying, shrugging to the room at large.

Both Frederick and Will perk at his name. Frederick has not heard the rest, but Will tenses slightly under Frederick's arm and says, "That's ridiculous. Hannibal didn't do it."

"How do you know?"

"Why the hell would he?"

Jimmy makes a vague motion with his hand. "Well, he and Bedelia never show up. It opens you to suspicion, you know."

Beverly looks thoughtful. "I'm not sure. The person seemed too short to be Hannibal."

Frederick inhales smoothly, holds, exhales.

"Of course it wasn't Hannibal, don't be ridiculous," Kade says, glaring over at Brian. "Bedelia wouldn't allow that sort of mischief. Like I told Jack previously, this is simply the next in a long line of debauchery which is spreading from Luna to Sol. Remember about my mail, Jack?"

"I remember," he intones.

"I looked around my home, just like you suggested—" She pauses here, one finger raised skyward, perhaps for dramatic effect. She eyes around the circle shrewdly. "And didn't find one piece of the stolen mail."

Freddie groans.

Brian says, "Is this an actual point on the meeting agenda? Or is this just heresy? Because Law and Order is on in twenty minutes."

"If you're not going to read the asterisked emergency meeting point on your agenda," Kade says heatedly, "then why did I bother express printing at Kinko's?"

"You tell me."

"Okay, but—" Beverly raises her hand, the other holding her agenda. "Mine has a typo."

"Mine too."

"Yep."

Kade puts her head in her hands.

The meeting comes to an end just minutes later, when Kade seems to feel there is no use in corralling everyone's flickering attentions. Upon exiting her home to the night warmth, Will and Frederick come to stand on her sandcrete step stones with a few others in a semi-circle.

"The nerve," Will says, batting at a firefly. It flees, then returns, nesting in one dark curl. "Blaming Hannibal."

Brian is gone, trotted off around the cul-de-sac to his cooled home, to settle before his sixty-inch television. The others have similarly dispersed. Only Beverly, Phyllis and Jack remain with them. Looking over their shoulders they spy from the window, Kade, who is likely watching to make sure her grasses remain untrampled. The five of them ignore her.

"He's kind of weird, Will," Beverly says, head cocked to the side.

Frederick clears his throat. "It is so."

Will sighs.

"Have you been properly introduced?" Phyllis asks.

"Oh, sure. We hang out all the time," Will says, shrugging. He does not seem to register the alarmed looks upon the other's faces. He shakes his head again to rid himself of the firefly. "God, I can't stand these bugs. I'm going inside. I'll leave the door unlocked, Ricky," he murmurs, pressing a kiss into Frederick's ear. He jaunts off until he meets the sidewalk, then loops around to their darkened home.

Frederick sighs, makes to follow. Jack stops him. "Can we, uh, can we talk, Frederick?"

Frederick raises an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Well," Phyllis and Beverly say.

Over Beverly's shoulder, Frederick watches Will stand at their doorway. Briefly, before entering, he looks up at the lighted windows next door. Turns the key and his form diminishes.

"So, Hannibal," Jack says. He shrugs a bit, rubs at his left arm. "It's just that, he can be a little. Well. What I mean is."

"You let Will hang out with Hannibal?" Beverly asks.

"Let," Frederick murmurs, flinching. "I do not *let* him, he simply has made a friend."

"A friend," Phyllis says, nodding. She presses her lips together.

Frederick shakes his head. "I know Hannibal is weird. But Will seems to like him well enough."

Jack opens his mouth, then shuts it. He nods. "Of course, Will should have friends." He clears his throat, and Phyllis' eyes seem to light at this.

"Frederick," she says, touching him gently on the arm. "If Will should ever want for different company, send him to our house during the day. I could use someone to talk to."

"You talk to *me*," Beverly cries.

Phyllis elbows her in the ribs. She and Jack both bid them goodnight and make for the right side of the sidewalk, the loop there that follows. They darken under the shadows of the trees. And standing in front of Kade's house now, are simply Frederick and Beverly and he cannot help but feel this is wholly inappropriate. He tries not to squirm yet finds himself squirming. Beverly looks easily into his eyes, her hands jammed deep in her jeans pockets.

He could stop this manhunt right now, and quietly confess. Tell her he apologizes, and if she wishes it, he will move. Tell her he never meant it.

She says, "These two ladies used to live in your house. Like, they were married, and they fit in pretty well around here. One of them was like CEO of some big meatpacking corporation or something. Anyway, the other one was a housewife, and she started hanging around Hannibal. That went on for a while. I guess she didn't know what she was doing, and he was showing her. They were reading books and cooking. He was teaching her."

Frederick remembers, suddenly, Bedelia from across her dining room table. The candlelight in her hair. Her mouth moving with the words—

"Students," Frederick says, as if in trance.

"Right." Beverly pulls a face. She places thumb and forefinger together on one hand, forming a tight circle into which she repeatedly slides the forefinger of her other hand. "*Teaching*. Catch my drift?"

Frederick's mouth is as the Sahara. His stomach as the Dead Sea. He tells her he catches her drift and they drift apart. As he walks the left of the concrete, it seems like Ages pass and he walks through marsh and meadow, through thickets and thistles. In the time it takes him to arrive to his house, open the door, and allow himself in, whole mountains have crumbled and civilizations have gone the way of Rome. Caesars have taken legions to task and the moon has lost half its mass. Frederick hears something whirring lightly in the back of his head, and it is a thrumming with heavy rhythm, studded with bass. The sounds which hail the goddess.

In their bedroom, Will is sitting in bed, legs crossed in his boxers. He is reading, and at hearing Frederick, he looks up, bright-eyed.

"Ricky," he says.

Frederick says, "I love you."

Will's eyes widen minutely, for the briefest of seconds. Then his eyebrows lower, his mouth perked to a smile. "I love you too," he says. The book in his hand loosens.

Frederick comes to the bed. Softly, quietly. As one would approach an altar.

"No," he says, shaking his head. He sits slightly away from Will but takes his shoulders lightly in hand. "I... I love you," he says again, moving to place his head in the crook of his neck. "I love you. I love you. I love you." He breathes in the scent of Will which is slightly worn from the day and breezed from the out of doors. And just barely of frankincense, as if it were a perfume. He continues to say it, murmur it, to the soundtrack of Will's pleased sighs, and he does it long into the night with such conviction that one might summon higher beings with it. One might conjure miracles.

During the following few days, Will finds himself arriving at Hannibal's house earlier and earlier. He strides in as Hannibal has barely opened the door. So alive is he with his burstings. He has never been a morning person, and would pause to say he now is, but there is something ruminating inside him, percolating, like Hannibal's coffee machine.

Nights have been wondrous of late. Frederick's attentions have been lavish and full, and he marks Will both with bites and murmurings of devotion. Will has no idea where such tenderness has come from but finds himself enamored with it. He attempts to repay this with meals cooked to the best of his ability. He demands that Hannibal instruct him in the way of French cuisine, long-stewed Italian sauces, and even the style of Hannibal's motherland—

"Latvia, right?"

"Lithuania, Will."

"Close enough."

—and finds himself not completely lost in the kitchen.

He brings his copy of *The God of Small Things* and openly complains or lauds. He burns garlic, filling Hannibal's house with an acrid air. He tells Hannibal that Y and L woke him up early with their weed-whacking and if he has to throw a rock into their whirring cogs, he will, Kade's ire be damned.

He tells Hannibal he was the tail-end of the discussion at that weekend's Neighborhood Association meeting.

"Brian thinks you're the one who was peeping on Beverly," Will says, half-yawning, as he pops a grape into his mouth. They sit at Hannibal's sun-warmed dining table around half-empty mugs of coffee, plates of green grapes, dragon fruit, sliced peaches. Will shrugs. "I tried to tell them it wasn't you. I don't think anyone really cares what Brian has to say." He pauses. "Actually, I don't think even Brian cares what Brian has to say."

"You're defending me," Hannibal says, voice lilted.

Will snorts. "Don't read into it." He grins over, one eyebrow raised. "I just thought it was dumb. But *I* know you're exactly the type of guy to look in windows."

Hannibal's eyes are brilliant. He leans forward the slightest bit, yet looks away. "Though I only have eyes for your window."

"Is that supposed to be flattering?" Will tries not to look as flattered as he is. Though he knows it to be falsehood. As Bedelia stated, there have been many before Will. The logic follows that there will be many after Will. Long after Hannibal realizes he is trying to squeeze juice from a stone. Will must only wait it out. He taps his foot against the floor.

"Nothing but the truth between us, Will," Hannibal says.

"Oh, is that so."

"It is."

Will makes a noise of disbelief. He takes a slice of thick peach from the plate before him and raises it between three gentle fingertips. "Tell me something true then, Hannibal. Would you be *mad* at me if I closed my blinds one night? Just closed them for good and made you stop your sick peeping."

"Is that what you are considering?"

Will has not at length considered it. Though it would be right. "I ought to," he says, looking at the bright bursting yellow of the fruit. The roseate line nearest the absent pit. He opens his mouth, perhaps to speak, then thinks better of it. Places the point of the peach slice between his lips instead.

Hannibal's gaze on him is smoky. Rising from Hannibal's body like a furnace. He says, taking great care, "If that is what you chose to do, Will, I would have no choice but to accept it. I would simply retreat into reverie." His gaze pulls Will's, wrests it from the fruit and his sticky fingers nearest his mouth. Pins it and drives into it. The undulation of his widely blown pupils. "Memory. Of you. Your pale back in the moonlight. The sweat across your shoulders and the toss of your head. Your mouth frozen open in some noise I have longed to hear. That blessed arch. It seems carved from marble. Yes, and even the hazed look in your gaze. The depth that becomes you. All these things would be my comfort if you shut the portal to your majesty." His lips quirk to a smile. "But no. I would not be mad."

Will had not been aware of it, but he has been holding his breath. And he pushes the dripping fruit to his bottom lip and rubs, as if it were lip-gloss, until his mouth is saturated with natural sugar. He blinks fervently, looks down to the table. His body warmed through.

"I— I guess maybe it's no harm," he says, recollecting himself. He places the fruit back on the plate.

When he takes his hand away, Hannibal takes the fruit gently, and eats it.

Chapter End Notes

Someone separate these two.

Persistence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Things are slowly changing in Sol Terrace. Though everything seems slow-moving to Frederick lately. He walks as if through muddy waters. And the waters rise – only yesterday he was knee-deep. Now it seems to have moved to his waist. He has told Bedelia this, to which her only response was that their primary goal in these lunch-hour sessions is to assess how he's found himself in this ditch. "And then to manage the ponding water," she said.

Frederick has never seen a therapist before, and certainly not one who is his neighbor. Therefore he exudes unsureness in everything he says, every movement made. He does not know what he should reference. Is allowed to reference, even. What jumps the boundary between patient and doctor? What crosses the line into informality?

You can be as open as you like here.

Yes, she said that.

But where can he start? The runes along Will's body are too personal. Frederick tried to give voice to them on the first day and found himself commenting on the view from the windowed wall instead. He will save that, then. He moves onto other things. As how the nighttime view from the front of his house is constantly flooded with the glow from Jack Crawford's flashlight. Somehow, Kade has protested so much that it has sent the man on some hunt for a child, a stray hooligan from Luna Terrace who is on the prowl, stealing mail and peering into windows. He is strolling the street nearly every night.

Frederick shifts on the leather loveseat. Touches at the armrests with one pointer finger. "I don't know what he means to find. With that huge flashlight, anyone can see him coming a mile away. You'd think a police chief would use more tact."

"Does this bother you? Jack's roamings?"

"Yes, it bothers me," Frederick groans. "I can't see him from the bedroom but I know he's there. I can feel it, like some sort of frequency."

Bedelia sits in a turquoise dress; the same shade as the colors in the waiting room. Over the past week, couples who join Frederick in that room have grown accustomed to his lone status. Perhaps they think him a divorcee. Yet, on the couch, Frederick is only too aware of his singularity, and he oft pats the spot where Will would sit. If Will knew he came here. If Will would even want to come. Bedelia catches Frederick's gaze. She says, "You're hyper-aware due to guilt."

Frederick taps his fingertips along his knee. "Yes."

"Perhaps more than that."

"More than guilt?"

She blinks slowly. Frederick has come to understand this as her version of a nod. She says, "Guilt— and anger, or at the very least annoyance. With Jack Crawford on patrol, you cannot go out and do what you did to incite this manhunt."

"That's ridiculous." Frederick furrows his brow. "I'm not like that. It was an accident. I don't— I didn't mean to look at Beverly, I've been feeling terrible about it."

"Terrible, but not enough to confess."

"That's what you'd have me do? To what end?"

"Your conscience's relief."

Frederick slowly shakes his head. He is so far from relief. He looks out at the Baltimore day reflecting the sunlight in every high-rise window. The top of the Transamerica Tower gleams as if it were the pinnacle of the world.

"I thought about telling her this weekend. At the Neighborhood Association meeting," he says, eyeing up at Bedelia. She seems unbothered, and her expression lacks familiarity. As if these things have nothing to do with her. "But I couldn't. She went off on a tangent about—"

He stops.

Is this allowed? Bringing her husband into this might complicate matters. Yet, Frederick notes with a bit of annoyance, he is the one paying through the nose for these sessions. He might as well try it.

"About your husband," he continues.

Bedelia, for a wonder, smiles. "I was wondering when we would begin to talk about your problems, Frederick. I'm pleased it did not take more than a week."

"My problems? Hannibal is not my problem—"

"No, he is yours and Will's. One of many. But when one takes a pearl and strings it along others, they soon make quite a piece of jewelry." She raises one white wrist on which swings a thick gold bangle. "And we are not here about Hannibal, Frederick. We're here about those lovely pieces of jewelry that you and Will wear jointly."

Frederick stares at her for a moment, then looks down at his left hand which rests on his thigh. The simple gold ring he wears there.

"Why did you come to Sol Terrace, Frederick?"

He can see himself in the gold. His face scrunched and distorted.

"I came," he says, murmuring nearly, "I came— to start over. With Will. I wanted to erase— erase those marks on him." He says it before he's quite realized, and in the vacuum of

sound following, he realizes he cannot take these words back. He feels heated along his face and neck, and he continues to stare at his reflection. His mouth moving. As if it is someone else. "They cover him all over. Handprints, where that man he slept with touched him. I know they're not real. I know they're not. But they cover his entire body and I can't stop looking at them. I thought they would go away when we started— when we started having sex again. But they glow all the same, and in the dark—" He pauses, swallows. "In the dark, they are terrifyingly beautiful. As if someone has written on him with a dripping ink."

Bedelia blinks slowly. "And what color is this ink, Frederick?"

He looks up, and clenches his fist in the fabric of his slacks. "Red," he says. "He is red all over."

*

Will sits in the passenger seat of the Bentley and a strange feeling comes upon him. At once, he is admiring the upholstery and also inly cringing at being driven from the wooded dip of Sol Terrace and into Baltimore. It feels illicit, wrong, to be doing so with Hannibal on a Wednesday afternoon at 2 PM. Yet Hannibal insisted; indeed would not take no for an answer when, as they contemplated what went wrong with Will's attempt at soufflé making the night prior, Will divulged to Hannibal that he has in his home only wet measuring cups.

Hannibal looked at him with something three shades away from disgust.

Will'd shrugged in Hannibal's chrome kitchen. "What?" he asked. "There can't be that much difference."

Little discussion passed between them – Hannibal allowed for hardly any. Will was somehow herded into Hannibal's car and they ride through the city, during which time Will comes to realize that he has not yet seen much of Baltimore. He looks at the tall buildings, and does not find it too different from Boston. The air is stale but rushing past. Will rolls his window down halfway and leans a hand out of the side, cupping it skyward and feeling air between his fingers. He leans back into the seat, sends a glance at Hannibal in the driver's side.

For the heat, he wears a short sleeved shirt, which Will has not seen on him prior. His forearms are darker than his upper arms, but muscles swell under the skin. He drives with one hand on the 2 o' clock position. He glances over at Will, catches him staring, and holds this gaze.

Will huffs, his nose reddening. "Watch the road. You wanna get us killed?"

Hannibal says nothing. The car comes to a slow stop as they pull into an expansive parking lot off the main street. It is nearly filled, and Hannibal parks near a grassy island upon which sits one young tree. People stroll past, voices clamber over one another. Will unbuckles his seatbelt, turns again and finds once more Hannibal staring placidly.

Will feels he is beet-red. "*What?* What is it?"

Hannibal says, "You are terribly alluring."

"I *know* that," Will says. He makes to look put-upon but absorbs the compliment as if it were sustenance. "You can't keep saying things like that, you know." He looks away from Hannibal's all-encompassing gaze once more, and becomes fixed on the dashboard. "We've got to cool it."

"We," Hannibal says, sounding minutely delighted.

"If Frederick heard you—"

"Highly unlikely since he is nowhere in the vicinity."

Will swallows, groans. "Still. We're friends, right?" He looks back at Hannibal, leaned in his seat. Chest straining against the light, white fabric of his shirt. His legs shifting slightly over the gas and brake pedals.

Hannibal says, "The best of."

"Well, then, you should start acting like it. I mean, I like this— I've never *had* a male friend before," he says, in tone of admittance. It sounds ridiculous, even to his own ears. A thirty year old man with no male friends. "Yeah, never since puberty at least. Feels like I've been fucking ever since my voice changed." Hannibal's mouth twitches at this — reveals one pointed canine. Will smiles, raising one eyebrow. "I know," he says, lowering his voice. "I know you're always thinking about it. Fucking me. I can see it in your eyes, even now."

A woman and a young child hold hands and walk past the car. Their voices muffled. Hannibal is perfectly still, as if he is not a living being at all but a subject captured in paint. Only his chest moves with his light breathing. His lips slightly parted.

Will leans one elbow upon the arm rest between their seats. Gnaws at his lower lip. "You're such a fucking pervert, Hannibal," he says, taking care to enunciate each syllable as if it is of painful importance. "I mean, do you even *see* your wife when you're having sex? Or is it me?"

"You," he says, the word dry.

A singular trickle of pleasure slides the length of Will's spine. He rolls his shoulders back, tosses his curls in Hannibal's direction with a grin. Takes his hand to the car door handle. "Thought so," he says, before exiting.

Hannibal shuts the engine off and follows him, catching up to walk by his side as they move from the hot parking lot to the cool insides of a Williams-Sonoma. Will feels particularly pleased with himself. If Hannibal thinks he can get away with shamelessly teasing Will, he's got another thing coming. Will knows tricks too. He is no child. And the only way to get Hannibal to straighten and act like a proper friend is to treat his incessant come-ons as if they hold no meaning, like a game: one they can both play. And Will knows he is quite good at it. It's gotten Hannibal to turn deathly silent — quite a feat.

In the giant wealth of the store, it is bright and slightly cold. Metal and tin shines from each wooden shelf, and the ceilings are twice as high as Will expected from the outside. There is some song playing over the speakers, one he has heard before but cannot name. A thudding bass line. Snares. A high-voiced woman's breathy calls.

Will sighs, standing amidst the hardwood floors. "This place is huge. We're never going to find measuring cups."

But Hannibal is already walking to the left, and back behind another row of shelves. Will follows, stuffing his hands into his pockets. It is not lost on him that they are two men walking around together with wedding rings on. He would not like someone to get the wrong idea and comment, thus making Hannibal already more smug than he usually is. Will lingers nearby as Hannibal studies the wall of dry measuring cups. Glass, ceramic, earthenware. The entire store smells of baked goods. Will is half tempted to whine to be taken back and cajole Hannibal into making pastries.

At length, he turns back to Will and says, "Do you own a mixer?"

"Uh. A hand-mixer."

Hannibal sighs, turning back for the wall.

"Don't *sigh* at me," Will cries, balling his fists in his jeans.

"You are woefully under-equipped. Truthfully I have no idea how you've made it so far."

"God, you're such a dick."

"I'm surprised it's taken so long for you to notice. Not to worry though," he says, looking back over his shoulder with one scant eyebrow raised. "Your beloved husband will be providing all you require."

Will cocks his head to the side. He has little time to respond before Hannibal commandeers a nearby employee and instructs him to follow the two of them with two carts around the store. Will watches: Hannibal pointing to the most expensive brand of each product he deems necessary. The employee, a young man who murmurs only yes sir and no sir, takes each from the shelf carefully, placing them in the carts. He struggles but has the look of one who has long struggled. Will sees him and is reminded of himself before he came into a relationship with Frederick. Working a small time job he hated for need as opposed to some idleness. Going home every night to a small apartment in East Boston which he shared with three other people. The frigid winters that seeped beneath his threadbare sheets. The sticky summers. Will found himself staying over at Frederick's apartment as often as he could. Finding there warmth and breeze and the only hands that had never handled him ill.

The employee takes an earthenware casserole dish from a high shelf and places that too into the cart. Will, for just a moment, sees himself as he was at twenty-two. This image passes quickly, and Will hopes the young man finds some way out of this place.

At the cash register, Will offers up the Platinum American Express card for he and Frederick's joint account. The total is somewhere over three thousand dollars, but Will isn't one for specifics. Will complains once in the car again; the trunk weighted down by the vast amount of cooking equipment.

He looks out the window, raking a hand back through his hair. "Why did we have to get the most expensive stuff? I'd've been fine with plastic, you know. No need for fucking titanium or whatever it is you were pointing out."

Hannibal snorts lightly. He starts the ignition. "Because, my dearest friend—" Will makes a huffing sound at this. "—the price of quality in all things is sky-high."

*

To Will's mild surprise, Frederick does not seem overly concerned by the bill, or all of the new kitchen equipment. Though, Will is aware, this might be partially due to the fact that upon Frederick's homecoming this evening, Will prepared by drawing him a hot bath in the upstairs tub. He dotted the top of the still water with peppermint oil, which perfumed the hollow bathroom.

Will lingers at the rim of the tub. Frederick's hair is wet from recent washing, and it shines under the dimmed lighting. His hair, when wet, curls, not to the degree of Will's but enough that Will wraps his finger around one, coiling, and makes a ringlet.

"You never tell me about your patients," Will says, tugging the ringlet lightly. His laugh echoes in the room. "There's no confidentiality with insane people, is there?"

"Of course there is," Frederick says.

"Oh, come on."

Frederick leans his head back, until he rests it on Will's pant leg. The warmth and wetness of his hair soaks through Will's jeans. His green eyes a morass in the lighting.

"You wouldn't want your psychiatrist to spout off about *you*," Frederick says.

Will thinks about Hannibal. "But I don't have one. So it's moot." He leans over and presses a full upside-down kiss to Frederick's mouth. Pulls back the slightest bit. His eyes large and wide. "Come on, please?"

Frederick heaves a sigh. Will knows that sound. He grins, righting himself. Frederick says, "On the whole, my patients are very forthcoming. Medication does that. There's just one who's been a real problem." Frederick closes his eyes. "He tells me things I don't think are true. Perhaps to make himself look better for his crimes. Perhaps just to tease me."

"What kinds of things?"

"He killed his wife. And he likes to tell me it was retribution, for perceived slights."

"Perceived?"

Frederick shakes his head. He takes Will's hand in his wet one and places a kiss to the soft inner wrist. "Nothing major. Things like bad casserole."

Will snorts laughter, which rings further into the room. "If I made a bad casserole – which will probably happen – would you kill me?"

"I should hope it wouldn't be that bad."

"That's not an answer."

"Something that horrible would probably kill me first, honestly."

Will groans and dashes at the water's surface, spraying Frederick. Will then sighs and rubs his hair into Frederick's. "Maybe I could come visit you at work," he murmurs.

Frederick stiffens completely. "Absolutely not, Will. There're psychopaths there, I'll not have you—"

"Ricky," Will says, hissing the last syllable. "You know where those psychopaths were before your hospital? Living their lives out in society. In cities, suburbs, apartments, houses. They walked around in the grocery store. I could be surrounded by psychopaths all day, but you'd never know it until they did something crazy."

"Is this supposed to be comforting? Because it isn't."

Will sighs. "When Hannibal and I went to the city today, it felt nice. Different. Sometimes I think I spend too much time here."

"I know." Frederick pauses. He seems to be looking into the water. "I know. We should go away sometime. When work clears down a bit."

"Yeah, that'd be really nice."

Will thinks of places they could go. Things they could do. Perhaps it would do to leave Sol Terrace properly for a bit. The enclosure of the cul-de-sac is heavy, weighing, and the recent notions of some peeping tom make things all the worse. He tells Frederick this. Frederick says, "Yes, it's troubling."

*

Thursday comes with the continuation of pleasantly mild weather. Will makes an omelet for breakfast which is laced with more hot peppers than Frederick would find ideal, and his coffee is still ridiculously bitter, but other than these points, he can find little to critique. And he tells Will he is amazing. The new equipment in the kitchen shimmers. Frederick thinks he would like to take all of it to the nearest compactor, simply because they were Hannibal's idea to acquire.

Yet, he pauses himself in his thinking.

For all of the fingers being pointed at Hannibal as an overwhelmingly shady fellow, Frederick knows he has nothing but Will's word to go on. And Will's word has yet to falter: that they have not touched each other. Frederick believes this to be true. He does not know if Hannibal has made attempt, but he sees in Will a happy, jovial countenance that seems to brighten each day.

This is the key:

After Will's affair with the man, Matthew Brown, Will returned to the house that night reeking of sex. It was so strong even Georgette's eyes widened, though she turned quickly to dust at a vase. Frederick watched him nervously flit around the house, eyes darting from side to side: an animal waiting to be captured. In the few days after, his countenance never lifted. Never did he smile. Never did he make light. He looked as if he'd been wounded and was hiding the gash under his jacket, wary of showing it to others. Showing weakness. Frederick told himself these things meant nothing. Denial is a readily available balm.

Then he came: a young man of lean build and brown hair. He came with the bearing of a pauper approaching a king, asking for handouts. He spoke quietly, succinctly. Slightly with a slur. Standing on the steps of Frederick's Back Bay office, he thought the young man to be mad, or simply scorned by Will's rejection – which he then embellished into a full-night tryst of Will in the backseat of his car. Frederick told him to leave, and went home. And he cried despite himself. Despite the balm he had, in the past few days, used to cover his body. Georgette's timid voice asking if he was all right through the bathroom door. And when Will arrived home.

Will said no. His eyes said yes. Will is a terrible liar.

"Of course he is," Bedelia says in their session on Thursday. "People like your husband rarely need to lie. Even if the truth is unpalatable to others, they power through life by way of their beauty, and in this rarely are they punished for wrongdoings. It is a skill he has never had to strengthen." She pauses, then adds: "Like most skills."

Frederick sighs. "Bedelia, if we're going to do this, could you kindly not take jabs at my husband?"

"My apologies. I'm not wrong though."

Frederick rubs at his left temple.

"Tell me, Frederick: do you see that this is what makes Will a target? His complete inability to rely on anything but his beauty?"

"A target for what?"

Bedelia levels a glance at him. The noontime sun hits her golden necklace. It glimmered in much the same way this morning, as they two walked from their homes to their cars. As they drove down to the stop sign, as if they had not spoken since the dinner. She says, "People like my husband."

"You don't think Will is really interested in simply being Hannibal's friend," Frederick says in a morose tone.

"On the contrary. He seems earnestly attempting that." She squares her shoulders. "But Hannibal is persistent."

Frederick feels his inner temperature rising. He clenches one fist on the armrest. "Let me ask you something, Bedelia. If Hannibal is so *persistent* with his targets, why are you still with him? Why don't you *leave*?"

"Why are you still with Will?"

Frederick cannot help the disgusted face he makes. "That is not the *same*. They are not the *same*."

"Aren't they?"

*

Hannibal has this annoying habit of constantly trying to one-up Will. Will thinks it such – then amends the trying to simply succeeding. He probably peered into Will's kitchen window this morning and found Will making a reasonably successful omelet. It was simple, not much finesse, but Frederick seemed overly pleased which in turn brightened Will for the day ahead. As he finds himself in Hannibal's dining room this morning, he sees that Hannibal has left over from breakfast a full frittata stuffed with sausages, peppers, dill and some artesian cheese that Will cannot pronounce.

"You're such a fucking show-off," Will says between large and voracious bites. His coffee mug sits beside the plate half-drained. "You guys have been married for a long time, why do you go all-out like this every morning?"

Hannibal is still in pajamas for the earliness of the morning. Will is too; he tramped over in bare feet and felt the coolness of the morning dew between his toes. The sugar maple leaves rustled overhead in the breeze. A lark watched him from a power line: his white shirt pulled on inside-out, his candy-striped pajama pants. The weather lately has been phenomenal.

Hannibal says, "A marriage is not something you simply stop trying at after a certain amount of years has passed. Both parties must constantly attempt to please and comfort."

"Sounds tiring."

"Is that not what you do, Will? In your ceaseless quest to gain favor with your husband."

Will scoffs. He sends a satisfied smile over the top of his mug. "I've *gotten* that favor. Sure, I try to make him happy with meals and stuff. But I think everything's all right between us now. It's so much better."

Hannibal's left eyebrow twitches lightly. "Is that so?"

"Well, I don't need to tell *you*, Superpervert." He lowers the mug back to the table. Takes an index finger and taps at the side of his neck where a fresh rosy mark blooms. Last night, over Frederick's shoulder and moon-strewn back, Will saw a faint shadow at the open window across the ravine. And he knows Hannibal watched as Frederick bit down into Will's neck. Will is covered in such red marks. He is red all over. "We haven't gone a night without since we started back up. Constant." Will rubs at the spot lightly, and winces at the slight discomfort. "He's different, almost. I can't quite put my finger on it. He gets really quiet, and he's never bit me and marked me up so much before."

"But you find it agreeable."

"Of course," Will says, blinking. "I like it when he's rough."

Hannibal looks at him. Really looks at him. He says, "Will, you do not know what rough is."

Will feels something sudden, a thud at the pulse between his legs. He adjusts it away, looks aside with a scarlet face. "Oh, please. What is that supposed to mean exactly?"

"It means what it means."

"And I suppose *you* know what rough is then, right?"

Hannibal seems almost to laugh, which Will finds endlessly irritating. For a moment, Will wonders seriously why he ever gives Hannibal the time of day. Hannibal gives something of a sigh and says finally, "Your husband has coddled you for the entirety of your marriage. Wrapped you in a love-scented embrace. But rough does not come laced with love. Rough is unsentimental. Rough comes with no allegory, no epitaph. Rough is not something your husband can give you."

Will's bare feet are flat on the hardwood flooring. He feels them begin to adhere with sweat. Sucks his teeth. "So, what you're saying is..."

"You must go elsewhere for that. As you have in the past."

"*Such* a bad influence, Hannibal," Will sighs. "I should stop hanging around you."

Hannibal lightly lifts his shoulders. Drops them. "Perhaps you should. But you won't."

The warning signs cannot get any bigger.

Bloodscent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It is raining.

Lightly, at first, and then with insistence. A strong and sure force from sky to earth. It pours from dark-bellied clouds to cement rooftops, aluminum awnings, and soddens now heavy-hanging foliage. Leaves that fill to the brim and tip and overflow. Wind kicks up high and streetlights shake in its force. In the parking lot, a car alarm sounds and the repetitious blare adds a bass line to the melody of billions of water drops falling across the downtown Baltimore district, some of which come to fall in Frederick's outstretched hand.

He raises an eyebrow from beneath the awning of the building where Bedelia's practice resides on the fourth floor. The concrete steps are awash and a paper cup tip-taps down to the gutter, hitting a pink wrapper and holding fast to the grating. Frederick has left his umbrella at the office in the hospital. He hadn't expected this. The weather lately had been so nice. It turned almost instantly.

Frederick inhales a large breath, and makes a running sprint to the Escalade in the parking lot. Some oil slick left from another car is wettened by the rain and Frederick nearly face-plants on the asphalt. He rights himself with a whirl, pops the locks, and is inside the driver's seat, drenched, using his pinky to dig water from his ear. He eyes back at the building, and can see the wall of windows upon the fourth floor. He sat there just fifteen minutes ago.

He eyes his Rolex, the beads of water obscuring the time. Starts the engine, and pulls into the street. On the first highway on-ramp, he adjusts into the middle lane and goes inside of himself until he hits the exit, which will lead him to his hospital.

*

The graduate school in a Wednesday night seminar. He remembers because it was below zero that night. On the train, he stepped in a unidentifiable puddle of liquid, and on the street his shoe nearly froze to the concrete. His current roommate was two weeks late with rent. The apartment above his had had their third rager that week. His milk had soured that morning. He was five years, four months and seventeen days out from meeting Will.

In the lecture hall, he sat morose and scribbling snowmen into the margins of his notebook.

The professor looked out at the room: brightly lit with the exception of one flickering light. Frederick and his classmates. She said, "Ecstasy. What is it?"

The room responded with silence.

She snorted laughter. Frederick can still remember her voice. Again, she asked, "What is it?"

A student in the front row seemed to place his hand up. Then, shakily, lowered it. Frederick never answered trick questions. Never even made the attempt. He found them unfair and a way for the doctors to metaphorically pop wheelies off the cinderblock heads of their students.

At the silence, she placed her hands behind her back and clasped them. Said, "This life is long and not much fun. And once you reach the end, it seems short and perhaps as if it had been more wondrous than you previously thought. But that is only regret, and the muddled effect of memory. These seventy or eighty years you spend on the planet are largely regulated. Static. Ecstasy is a moment out of the static. Where you experience a joy so pure, so heightened, that it is quite literally obscene. It is an out-of-body high so good we have engineered drugs to give it to us on demand. One of them is even named after the word. This is what makes that moment special: its rarity. The long march of life which is hyphenated by these little instances of irregularity. Nothing so good can come of licit dealings. This is, we shall say, off the books. This is brightness, this is beauty, and this does not last."

Frederick looked up at her. A snowman without a hat beneath the point of his pencil. And he found her smiling at him.

*

Will is lying on his stomach upon the couch in the living room; he gnaws on a half-devoured carrot with his book in hand when the lights go out. A huge clap of thunder precedes it, the lightning gone unseen. It makes a ticking noise, then a ping. Will looks up, blinking in the dark, his legs paused in mid-swing behind him. He is still for a long moment, carrot now devoured. If he waits long enough with his fingers crossed beneath the book's spine, perhaps the situation will right itself and he will not have to lift a finger.

After three hundred *Mississippis*, Will releases a long groan and moves from the couch. He walks to the window, the barest of light in the black-grey sky illuminating his view. Across the street, Beverly's house has also gone dark. So too Freddie's, Brian's and Jimmy's. Will cranes his neck to the far dip of the cul-de-sac. Kade's house is still lit. Across from him, so is the Crawfords' house. Will blinks widely and stumbles through the living room, the foyer, and into the kitchen where he bangs his hipbone on the island corner.

Hissing, scrunching his toes, he moves around it to come to the sink and the vista window beyond it. Hannibal's house too is still lit. Will exhales and finds his way back to the couch to where his phone is buried in between two cushions. He flips it open and dials his husband's cell phone.

It takes three rings and when Frederick answers, Will immediately launches into his grievances:

"Ricky, the power is out!"

"Oh, is it there too? Some of the buildings in the city have been knocked—"

"I'm in the dark," Will cries, gesturing with his free hand to the lack of light, which Frederick cannot see. "I don't think we have any candles or flashlights either."

"What? We don't?"

"Well, not unless you bought any."

"Will, that's important, don't you think—"

Will groans, and deepens his voice purposefully to make his displeasure evident.

Frederick sighs. "I'm not lecturing you, I just— well. Is everyone's power out?"

"Uh." Well looks back through the foyer. "Not everyone. Kade's house is lit up."

"Figures. She must have a backup generator. Hold on." He pauses here, and Will can hear whispering. When he returns, his voice is sped up: "Will, I've got to see to something. You'll be all right. Why don't you go over to Kade's?"

"I don't like her," Will says.

"Will, please. I really have to be going. I'll call you back, all right?"

"I'm not all right with this," he says, his voice thinning to a whine. He does not want to spend more time with Kade Prurnell than necessary; she might not even let him in without his prized provider. Will scowls just thinking of it. "Ricky, what'll I—"

"Will, I love you, but please, I will call you back. Give me half an hour."

The line clicks and Will puffs up, clenching his fists, until he realizes there is no one to blame for the power outage. He sighs. Why hadn't he thought to buy candles? He is only twenty pages from the end of *The God of Small Things*. He would like to see how it turns out. This morning at brunch – which, by now might as well be called breakfast for how early they have moved it – Hannibal said he was past done with it and waiting for Will to catch up.

Will pauses, phone in hand.

Hannibal.

He smiles to himself, leans over and quickly snatches his book from the couch. Toes on his sneakers at the foyer door, and eyes back at the racehorse, which is watching him with something like unease. Will sighs. Through the frosted glass of the front doors, he can see Jack and Phyllis' glowing house across the street. He sees a shadow moving towards it with an umbrella in hand and for just an instant he is alarmed, thinking it this roguish peeping tom that has Jack on patrol at nights and Kade fervently re-checking her mailbox. But as the Crawfords' door opens, the light reveals it only to be Beverly. She is allowed in quickly, and a shadow of guilt passes over Will. Perhaps he should be with the Crawfords instead.

He looks down at the book in hand. But he has a *reason* to go to Hannibal – so they can talk about it afterwards. Frederick would understand. Surely.

Will tucks the book under his shirt, pockets his cell phone, and opens the door. The rain is coming down in wild sheets and the din it creates is shockingly loud. The yards are but marsh. Will takes in a deep breath and dashes out to the left side of the house, over the wet grass and slip-slides into the ravine which is half-filled with water. He shrieks from the cold, and by this time there is no dry place upon his body. His curls are sodden and limp and clinging to his jaw, his stubbled cheeks. He stalks up out of the ravine to Hannibal's doorstep and pounds upon the door.

It seems to take an eternity. Will grinds his teeth and the door opens, revealing Hannibal in black slacks and a maroon button-up. His bangs fall to the side as he tilts his head.

"Good evening, Will."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, Will."

Hannibal stands back and to the side, holding the door open. Will's shoes make squishing sounds as he enters and Will can see through his parted curtain of hair that Hannibal is struggling to look serious. The door shuts, and Will stands in the foyer, dripping, forming a puddle around himself. Eyeing up, he finds the unicorn giving him a similar expression that the racehorse had.

"My power's out," Will says, pushing his bangs back.

"So I noticed."

"Yeah, you would."

Hannibal allows himself to smile, and it pauses there to fracture into a grin. He gestures to Will's wet-cat countenance. "Let's get you out of those clothes."

"Ha ha, how funny." Will snorts, biting his lower lip.

"Mm." Hannibal walks past him. "I was not being funny. Come now."

*

The entire first basement floor is acting as if none of them knows what rainstorms are. They can just hear the thunder, unlike the second floor basement patients, and unlike the ground floor patients they have far more serious mental conditions. Bailey has said some of them are screaming in fear, some in joy, as if it were not thunder clapping but the echoing footsteps of a giant messiah.

"Well, can't we just sedate them all?" Frederick asks, tapping the end of a pen against his desk. The curtains are drawn open. It reminds him of home. Outside, the world is dark though it is only 4 PM. It is impossible to see past the watery drear.

Bailey stands feet away from the desk, her hair in a haphazard bun. Her eyes dart from side to side. "All of them? I'm not sure if that--"

"No, no," Frederick says. Taps the pen again. "Maybe not. Who're the loudest ones?"

She recites: "Talbot, Greer, O'Mare, Wilson, Price, Jacobson... or... maybe it was Robertson." She pauses. "Sir, there are a lot."

Just beneath the constant din of the rain, Frederick can hear a few of them. Shrieking, as if they were being killed. Frederick cannot understand it. What do they think is out there?

"If we do nothing," she says, almost in a wondering tone, "they may just wear themselves down."

"Or never stop."

"Possibly. The second-floor basement is starting to get restless."

Frederick thinks of Abel Gideon down there and inly shudders. He has resided like an undersea beast beneath calm waters. Once, Frederick watched a documentary late at night – years ago in Boston, when Will was sleeping half-beneath the covers. It was some farce of speculation, some artist's renderings of what merfolk would look like in reality. Not the adorably-finned girl creatures of cartoons and television. Frederick watched: the blue of the screen flashing on his tired face. They looked monstrous, hideous, all imagined pulchritude diminished into translucence and needle-sharp teeth. Webbed hands. Frederick had barely been able to sleep that night, the visions of those things beneath barnacled hulls too fervent. He thinks of Abel Gideon that way. Frederick a lone diver meant to plunder Challenger Deep. And Abel the gnarled thing that waits there.

Of late, Frederick has avoided speaking with him. Their last conversation was entirely ridiculous and though Frederick knows Abel was only trying to unsettle him, he did something which was not too far removed from proper psychiatry. Abel led him to a limpid pool. And Frederick looked down into it. He saw himself rippled.

"Sir?"

Frederick swallows, looking up. "Right. Okay. Maybe I should have a talk with some of them." He says this before he quite realizes it and by the time it is in the air, Bailey is nodding and looking surprisingly pleased. Frederick supposes there are worse options. He is meant to be caring for them.

"I'm sure they'll appreciate that, sir." She walks backwards a few steps, holding the door open.

Frederick makes to stand, and catches glance of his cell phone on the desktop. "Oh!" He grabs it, waving over at Bailey. "I need to call my husband back. I'll be right there."

Her expression brightens further and she encourages him to take his time, despite the fact that over the next clap of thunder a piercing cry can be heard from below. They jointly

sigh and Bailey shuts the door.

*

Will sets the hairdryer down on the bathroom counter. He stands between the twin sinks and looks at his own reflection in the wide mirror. Over his shoulder, the window, and beyond that is the darkened outline of his house. It would feel as if he were in his own bathroom if not for the copious amount of perfumes and cosmetics on the right side of the counter. That is also where Will found the hairdryer. He wouldn't be surprised if they both used it.

His wet clothes are in a heap on the tiled floor. The towel with which he dried himself as well. He stands in front of the mirror in a pair of Hannibal's grey slacks which puddle slightly at his feet for their difference in height. And, too, a black button-up which Will rolls the sleeves of to his elbows. His curls are aerated.

The red lacquered box stands out amongst Bedelia's things. Will eyes around the bathroom as if someone were watching. He pulls the box to him, opens it and fishes around. The clanking and swirl of the jewelry is somewhat calming mixed with the sound of rain. Perhaps he should get Frederick to buy him some. There is a golden hair clamp, which Will eyes for a second before, experimentally, placing in his hair to hold back a few dark curls. Turns his head, eyes himself. Grins. When he takes it out, he wonders if Bedelia will notice the brown hair caught now in its coil. If it irritates her, it is only what she deserves.

Shouldn't have made that Harry Potter crack, Will thinks and shoves the box back against the mirror. He exits the room.

Downstairs. The living room is empty and half-dark, just soft lamplight from an end table. Will moves into the foyer again, and then the kitchen where he finds Hannibal, back turned to work on uncorking a red wine bottle at the counter. Will's book and cell phone sit on the granite island.

"Thanks," Will says, calling attention to himself.

Hannibal turns around, expression changing minutely as he takes Will in. The pant cuffs against the tops of his feet, only toes sticking out. The open v at his chest, and one sleeve rolled farther up his arm than the other. Hannibal undoes the bottle, setting the cork aside. "They look good on you," he says, turning back to the cupboard for wine glasses.

"A little big," Will hums. He tents his eyebrows. "Me and Frederick can wear each other's clothes and there's no difference hardly."

Hannibal takes the bottle and glasses to the island. "My condolences," he says, holding a glass to the light.

"Oh, fuck you."

Hannibal's eyes glint red. He smiles. "If you prefer white, I have some."

"No, I shouldn't be drinking. He'll be back soon and I'll need to make dinner."

"Not in this weather. Traffic will be awful." Hannibal begins pouring both glasses, nearly to the brim.

Will comes to the island, waving his hands. "Hey! Do you listen – that's way too much! Come on–"

An insistent vibration starts against the countertop. Will's phone lights up in blue and begins to gyrate, knocking into the slightly damp book, making its way towards the counter edge. It topples before Will can catch it, falling into Hannibal's palm.

Hannibal looks idly at the name. "Ricky is calling," he says.

Will would like to be annoyed but isn't able to summon the emotion. He snorts laughter and demands the phone, which Hannibal obliges by dropping it into Will's outstretched hand. Will eyes Hannibal seriously for a second and says, lowly, "Shh."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. Nods. Takes one of the glasses and begins drinking.

The phone is flipped open and pressed to Will's ear. "Hey, there you are. Was there an emergency?"

"Oh, no emergency, I mean– well, not really. I have to go calm down some of the patients. They're rioting because of the rain."

"Um, okay."

"I know it's ridiculous. I'm sorry. You sound less stressed, did the lights come back on?"

Will bites his lower lip. Hannibal has moved closer, and is standing right before him, watching him as if he is some fish in a tank. Will pointedly rolls his eyes up at him. "Not exactly. They're still out."

"You're not sitting in the dark, are you?"

"Well, no. I'm, uh."

"Did you go to Kade's?"

"I'm at Jack's," Will says, and then feels his stomach coat in hoarfrost. But he cannot take it back now. Hannibal's eyes in front of him are positively *jovial*. He takes another sip and continues to watch. "I mean, Jack and Phyllis' house. They have power too. I, uh, wasn't feeling the whole Kade suggestion. Sorry."

"Oh, that's fine. I'm just glad you're not alone in the dark. I never mentioned this, but Phyllis told me you should come visit her anyway – maybe she's lonely. You two seem like you'd be good friends. I know you're interested in making them. Well." He clears his throat. "All that to say, I'm really glad."

Hannibal picks up the other glass. He is lightly smiling, but it seems removed, and most of his face is blank. He takes the rim of the glass and presses it to Will's lower lip. Will opens his mouth to keep it from dribbling all down his clothes. He takes in nearly a tablespoon, and the wine is smooth and full-bodied. Will keeps his gaze raised to Hannibal's, even as Hannibal removes the glass and just a red line trickles down the corner of Will's mouth to catch and hang at his chin. Will swallows. Hannibal allows Will to take the glass by the stem, relinquishing it without crossing fingertips.

"Will? You there?"

"I—" Will exhales, eyelashes fluttering. "I'm here. Ah, Beverly's here too, so, you know, it's pretty hectic."

Hannibal is nodding.

"Hmm, yes, it would be. I really should be going. Listen, I might be a little late, the roads and all. Don't trouble yourself too much for dinner."

Hannibal leans down into Will's other ear. He grips the counter on either side of Will and whispers, "See?"

Heat is pulsating in Will's lower stomach and he is warm all over. He tells Frederick that he'll see him later and to be careful on the roads. He tells him to go save his patients from themselves. Frederick laughs and hangs up. When the line is dead, Will flips the phone closed and places it in his pocket. He inhales, exhales, and looks up into Hannibal's quiet expression.

"I," he says lightly, "am here to read. Not to be your entertainment, Superman."

"You do that without trying."

Will laughs, and Hannibal takes a step back, freeing him to move about. Will grabs the book off of the counter with his free hand and walks around Hannibal with his wine as well, heading into the living room. He glances back with a raised eyebrow and rolls his shoulders. Exits under the archway, expecting Hannibal to follow, and he does.

*

The vast majority of the first floor patients have no idea what they're screaming about. Frederick was able to surmise this after merely twenty minutes on the floor. It took another ten to find the original source: Lars Lewis who sat on his cot, cross-legged, forehead in his hands.

Frederick had managed to get his name from a patient further up. More forthcoming than the rest and ten times as lucid as he pretends to be. Frederick stood at Lewis' cell door and noticed he was crying.

"I can't help if I don't know what's wrong," Frederick said.

Lewis mumbled something.

"I'm sorry?"

His voice cracked: "Rain puts the fires out."

"I can't stop the rain, Lars," he said.

Lewis nodded. He placed his hands firmly against his ears and Frederick watched for a second as teardrops navigated the geography of his face. Veins and old scars. They met at the tip of his nose and fell with an inaudible sound to the coverlet. Frederick took in a big breath, exhaled. He thought about his conversation with Will and how his heart inflated knowing Will had not sought out Hannibal Lecter for comfort and company. He supposed he should be in some way grateful to – who? God? The universe? Anything, really. Small favors. Perhaps Frederick believes in karma. He felt he should give something back. He spoke to Bailey out in the hallway and in another ten minutes, the orderlies gave to Lars Lewis a set of safely padded and large earmuffs, too big and rounded to be of any suicidal threat. Frederick did not go back down to Lewis. He did not want to hear any thank yous on the off chance that they would be given, and in the event they weren't, he would just stare in silence at Lewis attempting to drown out his memories.

He sits in his office now and watches as the rain continuously pours down. A crack of thunder monstrously loud sends two car alarms into frenzy and over the walkie-talkie, Frederick can hear his staff trying to figure out who owns a red Camry and a rust-blue Cutlass. Frederick sighs and looks at his phone again. Clenches it.

It would be so nice if Will made friends with Phyllis. Beverly. Freddie– Frederick would settle for Kade Prurnell but he knows that will never happen. Will would sooner die. And Frederick does not care for the woman either, but right now he is so close to whatever secular version of prayer there is.

Please let Will make another friend.

Please.

*

"How did I know there was going to be incest? That's twice in a row, Superman. I'm onto you."

"Purely coincidence."

"Sure, of course," Will says, giggles, and tosses the book back over his head. He is lying on the carpet in the living room. It is cream, plush, feels lovely against his forearms and the bottoms of his feet. He isn't completely sure how he arrived on the floor. He started out on the couch with Hannibal, each of them on opposite sides at the armrests. Will sipped his wine and attempted to read, while Hannibal busied himself with another book. But Will continuously felt something strange and every time he looked over the page, he found Hannibal staring at him. Will rolled his eyes, protested, told him to stop it – to which Hannibal said only, "Stop what?" – and Will only barely made it through the remainder of the

book without launching a cushion at the man's head. He remembers finishing his first glass of wine, and then being poured another. He remembers finishing that one too.

The wine bottle stands empty on the floor, casting a long shadow in the low lit room. Hannibal sits with his back against the bottom of the couch, legs long and crossed at the ankles in front of him. Will's feet are a few inches from his.

Will's giggling comes to a slow stop, a sigh, and he places a hand on his chest. "It was so weird. Why don't we read normal books?"

"And what is a normal book, exactly?"

Will raises an index finger. "No incest."

"Noted."

"And no weird back-perspective ending."

"You don't find it agreeable?"

"No," he cries. "I wanted to know what *will* happen. Not what *already* happened. That's the point of an ending, to see how it turns out."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. "I don't think that's the point of an ending." He shrugs lightly as Will groans and continues: "Sometimes what happened in the past gives better context to the story than anything that will happen in the future. It provides a sense of gravitas to all that came in the pages before it."

Will feels slightly light-headed when he tries to raise himself onto his elbows. Instead he continues to lie flat and stares up at the ceiling, slowly blinking. "Like— you mean like 'our past tells us where we're going'? Like that?"

"Something like."

Will blinks again, sighing. "What a depressing message."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yeah. Way depressing."

Will blinks again, and this time when he opens his eyes, Hannibal is lying on his side, head propped up with one elbow to Will's right. Will feels the warmth radiating from his body. The storm outside is relentless. Will looks at his right hand in the plush carpet which is a few inches from Hannibal's.

"Why is it depressing?" Hannibal asks.

Will slightly furrows his brow. His entire face and neck is flushed with wine. "Because I don't want to be doomed to repeat mistakes of my past," he says, blinking himself

into more clarity. Hannibal's expression is calm, even. Will shrugs. "I want the future to be different. I should be able to— to determine that."

"Yes, well. I'm sorry to inform you of this, Will, but there is a lot that is beyond our control. One of these things is invariably what we are urged to revisit."

It has never occurred to Will before, but now, being so very close to Hannibal, it suddenly comes upon him that the man smells divine. The telluric scent of an autumn wood. Natural. Will breathes in deep. He raises an eyebrow over at Hannibal. Lowers his voice slightly. "I'm in recovery, you know. So any talk about urges is falling on deaf ears."

"I don't think so."

"You're just like those addicts on the show. Using around me," Will says, looking up into the man's eyes. They swim with colors of the drained wine. "Thinking that just because you use, I'll automatically want to. Like just because you're offering me a hit, I'll fall off the wagon."

"Mm." Hannibal looks marginally amused, and tears his gaze from Will's. Allows it to fall from Will's eyes, his lips, down the length of his body, settling somewhere below his belt line. "You are so good at shifting blame, Will. I'm rather charmed by it."

Will half-laughs, half-exhales. He squirms just a bit. "What's that mean?"

"It means you don't take any responsibility for your own actions. You say that I am an addict trying to tempt you, but you neglect that you are both an addict and the drug itself." His gaze returns, boring into Will's with a heavy urgency. Will feels glued to the floor by it. "You have been coming to my house earlier and earlier every day. And you stay later and later. Because you revel in the attention I give you, and despite your protests you like how I look at you. And you like knowing what I want to do to you. Or perhaps not knowing. You are, also, offering drugs to an addict." His mouth twitches to a smile. He leans down, into Will's ear, saying, "And every move you make is begging me to hit it."

Will is completely rigid in his pants, and is swallowing continuously. He makes a sound, like a desperate hum, and feels the scorching heat along his neck, forearms, like an itch he is too ashamed to scratch. Hannibal retracts a bit and Will looks away from him under night-thick lashes. He says, "I— I should be heading home," and makes to rise up on his elbows.

He makes it a few inches and catches Hannibal's smirk just before the man's hand is flat against Will's chest. The contact and surprise nearly knock the wind from Will. Hannibal shoves him back to the carpet and is on him in an instant — their mouths together and in the one second that Will has to respond, his instinct is to place his hands in Hannibal's hair and spread his legs. He opens his mouth as a country opens its gates in surrender to one invading. Allows them to march in and take control of its borders, its monetary holdings, every off-the-road village. Hannibal takes Will in hand, roaming briefly down the straights of his arms, his waist, to settle finally at his hips and grip there. Will gasps into Hannibal's mouth as he rolls his hips down.

There is nothing but this. Will's entire body is in tremors, and Hannibal's grip on him is inescapable. Will's mind is afire, and his senses too saturated to coordinate his upward movements and instead he lets himself be ground down into and Hannibal is making a sound which starts low in his gut and travels into the hollow cave that is their connected mouths, where it meets with Will's own higher-pitched cry which has traveled similar distance. Hannibal's hair is soft. Hannibal's teeth are sharp. Hannibal's right hand slides up from Will's hip, burrows beneath the fabric of the shirt and comes to connect fully on Will's bare side and Will twitches once, violently, and drags his nails down Hannibal's scalp as he comes into the trousers he's borrowed, and he is gasping, crying out desperately with every wet pulse he makes. Hannibal is smirking into their kiss and takes his mouth away, drags it down Will's cheek and chin to lick and kiss at the juncture of his shoulder.

It takes a moment.

Will finally ceases writhing. He lies on the carpet, gulping air, staring at the ceiling and blinking widely with crystalline green eyes. Hannibal is kissing at his neck, or more open-mouthed sucking, and distantly Will realizes he is at one of the marks that Frederick m— Frederick.

Will gulps in another breath, his legs shaking as if in arctic waters, and when he exhales the breath is moist. He makes a small whimper. Shuts his eyes. He opens them, and they are prickling with tears.

"Fuck," he says, shifting beneath Hannibal's now oppressive weight. "F-Fuck fuck *fuck* Hannibal fucking get off me oh my god Hannibal just—"

"Will," Hannibal murmurs, and it sounds like a sigh.

"—fucking get off me man just move," Will is saying, raising his voice. He is shoving at Hannibal's shoulders, and does not need to do so for long. Hannibal removes himself to where he was prior, at Will's side. Will is scrambling to stand.

"Will, calm down."

"Oh no oh my god what did you do—"

"Will. Will, listen to me. Come here."

Will is dizzy upon standing and there is a sizeable wet splotch at the zipper of his grey pants. He groans and, looking down, the tears fall from their precarious place in his eyes. He moves quickly from the living room to the foyer and finds his shoes, still only half dry from his tumble into the ravine. He begins haphazardly pushing his bare feet into them.

"Fuck fuck come on come *on*," and the room is blurred, his own feet are blurred and water keeps dropping to his forearms, "Jesus oh god oh no."

"Will—" Hannibal's voice is behind him and suddenly in front of him in the foyer. Over his shoulder, Will can make out white blurs which must be the unicorn. Will blinks and

the blurs diminish and he can see Hannibal's expression which is two shades from amused. He says, "Will, calm down. You mustn't get so upset, it's fine."

"It is not *fine*, Hannibal. Are you serious? You— you think this is funny?" Will's voice is strange to him, childish and clogged with tears.

"I don't."

"You're fucking— you're fucking *smiling*, fuck, I can't believe you—"

Hannibal's hand is on him and he bristles and he throbs. Hannibal has him by the wrist and pulls him in a step closer. "You're becoming hysterical. Just relax."

Will's eyes widen, his teeth slightly bared. "Do *not* tell me to—"

There is a sudden jingle at the door, the turning of tumblers, and Hannibal's hand is gone from Will. They both look up to find Bedelia coming through the door, closing her umbrella at her side. The rain falls behind her, and her shoulders are slightly damp. She looks first to Hannibal, who stands calm and sedate, welcoming her home. Then her eyes turn to Will, who is raggedly panting and whose face is splotched red.

She raises an eyebrow and Will feels her gaze as well, along him, and settling briefly at his zipper. Will is quite sure she's noticed he is not in his own clothes and he is ready to start crying again.

She shakes the umbrella, leans it by the door. Looks again at Will. "Your husband should be home soon. You'd best run along."

"Y-Yeah," Will mutters.

Bedelia exhales, and leaves the foyer quickly. Hannibal watches her go, and Will hurriedly tugs on his other sneaker. He makes for the door and once again is caught by the wrist, whirled around and facing Hannibal's stare. Will opens his mouth to yell but stops short upon realizing that Hannibal's eyes are pitch-black. It is strange, and he can only liken it to sharks' eyes after they have caught bloodscent. Hannibal grips his wrist slightly tighter and smiles and pulls him in until his mouth is at Will's ear.

His voice is soft. A tone of comfort. "Go home, Will. Dry your tears, hide these clothes where your husband cannot find them. Make something quickly for dinner. And do not forget to shower. You smell like me."

Will feels something like a brick in his stomach. Hannibal releases him. When Will walks out onto the front step, facing the sheets of rain, he briefly looks back over his shoulder. Hannibal stands in the threshold. He says, in lighthearted tone, "Have a pleasant weekend, Will."

He shuts the door.

The roads have been awful, purely for the reason that no one in Baltimore seems to know proper rain-driving protocol. Frederick spends the drive from the hospital to Sol Terrace squinting as well. The car needs new windshield wipers, but he never thinks to check them.

This afternoon, Bedelia told him that maintaining the small things is what will help keep a marriage on track. Frederick wonders if this extends to keeping their cars updated. He thinks probably not.

Despite the horrid weather, Frederick is in a decent mood. It is further lifted as he pulls onto his street and sees every house in the cul-de-sac is alight, including their own. He hopes it did not last for long, and mentally makes a note about purchasing ample amounts of candles and flashlights. He is dying to know if Will got along with Beverly and Phyllis. He should not press the issue though. He thinks about what he can say, how he can bring it up, as he rushes from the car, now parked beside the Mercedes, up to the front door.

He fumbles with the keys for only a second. The door opens and Will is standing before him in jeans and a black t-shirt. His curls are slightly wet as if from a shower.

Will says in a soft voice, "Welcome home."

Chapter End Notes

casual flexing

Fault

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Frederick has been awake for fifteen minutes. The sun passed into his closed eye and roused him from dreams he cannot remember. His back warms from the sunlight, and he faces into the bed, over the tumultuous white coverlets which are wrinkled and fisted in Will's hands. Will sleeps like a child and at just this moment, in just this light, he looks barely twenty.

From a holly in the yard, one finch calls into the morning. On weekdays, car doors and engines can be heard as early as this. But on Saturday, it is relatively quiet. Frederick never bothers to set his alarm on weekends, though he wakes at his usual time. Habit courses through him, a strong and sure river. This too is habit. If Frederick didn't have to get out of this bed at some point, he doesn't think he ever would.

He is quiet, statue-still, until Will begins to rouse himself. His eyelids scrunch, his lips move. Reaches out for Frederick who is nearby without opening his eyes. Blind and needy, like a newborn. Frederick smiles and grabs hold of him. The warmth of his skin. And their joint scent which mingles in every layer of the bed. Which has come, over the course of eight years, to be congealed; Frederick can no longer identify Will's own scent or his own, and he can only think of this as the smell of home.

Will's eyes finally open, then shut, for the fervent sun. He moves in closer, placing his forehead against Frederick's bare chest.

He is mumbling something.

Frederick says, "Mm?"

"I said," louder now, "what should I make for breakfast?"

*

Fascinating.

On weekday mornings, Frederick is usually too harried by readying himself for work to notice, but today no such worries plague him. He sits at the island in the kitchen, a light of rose and honey streaming in. Will stands in pajama pants at the stove, his torso marred by red. But Frederick instead concentrates on the movement of his hands, his angled shoulders.

The smooth chopping, the blunt sounds of knife against cutting board. Will's opposite hand turning peeled potatoes and irregular cuts spilling out onto the granite counter. He scoops them into a bowl, spills in too much salt, too little rosemary. The oil on the stove begins to pop. In another skillet, Will pours from a bowl of beat eggs mixed with sumac and paprika. Frederick watches his cool gaze down into the pan. The sun on his white body. One handprint on his left side sirens particularly. Frederick raises his gaze to Will's face.

He has not said much since last night. After dinner, his eyes were deep and faraway. Frederick opened his mouth to ask about Will's time spent at the Crawfords' and Will leaned into him, suddenly their tongues together, suddenly Will's hands in his hair, suddenly Will murmuring *Ricky Ricky I missed you Ricky* and from there, Frederick didn't speak so much.

Will goes to the fridge, returns with a package of bacon. The entire kitchen is heady with scents of onion and rosemary. Will has a thyme sprig hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"What do you think of Phyllis?" Frederick asks. He takes a low sip from his coffee – spectacularly bitter. Will has yet to master the ratios. Why does he never learn that from Hannibal?

The bacon hits the pan. Hisses. "She's not so bad."

"So—" Frederick sips again. "So you wouldn't mind hanging out with her more?"

A white-grey cloud arises from the pan. Will grabs the metal spatula from nearby and begins stirring the potatoes in their oil. With a wooden spoon, he adjusts the eggs.

"Nope," he says.

Frederick thinks on counting chickens before they hatch. Yet in him is some new hope. Will continues to move about the kitchen, from stove eye to stove eye, as a young ballerina who has recently ascended to pointe shoes. Unsure, strange expressions of pain and confusion crossing his face. But he is beautiful and in his imperfection, he is horribly perfect. Frederick is at last presented with a plate and Will is licking a spot of ketchup from his thumb and half his curls are going one way, the other half another.

Frederick grabs him by the wrist and Will jolts.

"I'm so lucky," Frederick says.

Will eyes him for a long moment, smiles around his thumb. He leans down and presses a firm kiss to Frederick's ear.

*

In the red of dusk, Will is nothing but a threadbare sheet of nerves. He feels as if someone were to pull, he would simply unravel, and in unraveling he might cease to exist. He and Frederick walk through the gentle cul-de-sac towards Kade Prurnell's house for their weekly Neighborhood Association meeting. The deep scent of freshly cut grass is on the wind, and the power lines hang heavy with birds.

He never should have lied. He feels the weight of it – tangible, and hot, on the back of his neck. Forcing him down and still.

Will twitches, remembering last night. The heat between his legs, Hannibal's hands on his clothed hips, and then one firmly against his bare left side. The shock of which ripping an

orgasm from him which was not so unlike a cyclone. It churned in him ceaselessly. In the moment, it felt like it had lasted an eternity.

Frederick is speaking. Will tries to quiet his mind, to take a deep breath in and then out. He can leave dealing with the traitorous bastard for Monday. The only thing he has to worry about is the Crawfords and that they do not speak of the storm outage last night and who and who was not present at their home. Will thinks he can do this. They come to the front door – voices rising high inside. Frederick knocks.

Kade opens the door, her shrewd gaze softening on Frederick alone. "Oh, good evening. Right on time, as expected. Please, come in."

Frederick thanks her. Will doesn't bother. As they walk in, she continues: "For once, we're all together. Crisis unites and all that."

Will pauses, looking into the cushioned wealth of the living room to find all Sol Terrace residents, including his leftmost neighbors who sit side-by-side on a loveseat adjacent from the extinguished fireplace. Hannibal turns his head smoothly in Will's direction and regards him for just an instant, before smiling. Will's body is nigh immobile, and next to him Frederick also pauses. Frederick shakes from it almost instantly and responds to everyone's greetings.

They two are seated close together. Bedelia in burnt gold, the fabric cascading against her skin, and Hannibal with similar color in the pinstripes of his shirt. He has an arm draped over Bedelia's supple shoulders, but his gaze is on Will instantly, fervently, and Will bristles like a cat, poised at once to run back home.

Frederick's hand is gentle on him. Will goes where he goes. To the couch opposite their neighbors, between Beverly and Freddie. Kade comes to sit in an armchair adjacent, and there are plates upon plates of hors d'oeuvres. Crab and avocado toast points. Salami-egg canapés. Olives with garlic and lemon. Salted almonds in one stainless steel bowl. The oil burners sit at the table corners, and the scent mixes with the food in an unpleasant way. Will's stomach is churning lightly and, distantly, he remembers the way his legs quaked last night.

Kade is passing around the meeting talking points, to which there is much groaning and idle chatter that Kade attempts to silence. Will is looking everywhere he can. At the old country home painting on the wall, at the fireplace, at the new lime green manicure Freddie is showing off. At Jack and Phyllis sitting nearby, talking amongst themselves. Yet he continues to feel Hannibal's gaze, the ethereal tendrils of which tug at him, lightly, laughingly.

When Will finally glances over at him, Hannibal is gingerly fiddling with one gold lock of Bedelia's hair. Curling it around his middle and index fingers. Rubbing it like spun silk between two rough fingertips. He smiles.

Will swallows.

"—safety hazard," Kade is saying, in tone of lecture and with her finger raised. Will looks over as she continues: "Everyone should have backup generators. What if everyone's lights were still out?"

Jack looks to restrain a groan. "I really don't think that's necessary. Almost everyone who didn't have one came over last night, we were fine."

Will's hand in Frederick begins to moisten with sweat. Frederick does not seem to notice, and he too is slightly stiffened. Will wonders if it is for Hannibal's presence here. He glances at the two of them from time to time, those furtive looks Frederick must think no one can notice. Will always notices. He catches Bedelia's gaze, then returns to Phyllis who speaks now.

"Everyone's always welcome over," she says. "I—"

"I just want to say," Will begins, and his own voice in the room sounds strange, for he never speaks much here, "that Jack and Phyllis were really kind to open their house to everyone last night. And that me and Frederick are going to be buying a backup generator."

Everyone is currently eyeing Will, most with looks of slight confusion, and Kade with annoyance.

Frederick whispers to him, "We are?"

Kade says, "I opened my home too, you know."

Jack groans.

"Listen," she says, ignoring it, "let's get to the first bullet—"

Hannibal interrupts this time: "I would like it known that our house is also open to whomever needs it. In case of another storm." He looks around the room, pausing minutely over Will who refuses to hold the gaze.

Neighbors begin to hum thanks in confusion. Brian speaks up that there is another series of light showers forecasted for the next week. Before this can take off on a meeting-wide tangent, Kade raises her voice above all others.

"Can we *please* carry on?" She looks around as if to gauge any further outbursts and settles a leveled gaze upon Will.

Will, feeling her suitably tired of the subject, and thus its chances of being reengaged markedly lowered, nods.

"Very well," she says. "Now— Jack, please update us on the peeping tom investigation."

Jack looks at her like she belongs in Frederick's hospital. "There is no *investigation!*"

"But—"

"Beverly said she saw some shoes. How am I supposed to find someone with just that?" He raises his hands, lifts his shoulders. "You all see me out there at night looking around but it was probably a one-time thing."

Freddie is nibbling at an olive. She shakes her head. "I'm not happy about this. It was only Beverly last time but what happens if it's me next?"

"The hell do you mean, *only Beverly*?" Beverly asks.

"Oh, don't get upset."

"I'm not upset—"

"Maybe you all should think about keeping your curtains closed," Jack mutters.

Freddie places her hand to her chest, affronted. "I shouldn't *have* to. Do you know how much my mortgage is? I should be free from worry that someone's going to just stare at me like a total freak at night."

Will snorts lightly.

Jack says, "That's not how it works."

Kade shrugs. "That's not even the worst of it."

"I swear to God, Kade, one more word about your mail—"

Will tunes out. Can barely concentrate. Not only is Hannibal's gaze still teasing at the edges of Will's being but Bedelia from time to time also offers up glacier stares in Will's direction. She has one leg crossed over the other, the gold-stilettoed foot lightly bouncing in the air. The looks she gives are not so unlike the one given last night, as Will was shaken, inundated with guilt, and she looked at him as if he were one in a gargantuan line that she has long since tired of seeing conga in and out of her living room. This instills in Will a feeling of great turmoil. She looks at him like she knows him. Yet she has never even had a proper conversation with Will before.

Will clenches his fist just thinking about it, to which Frederick jolts. Will had forgotten they'd been holding hands on the cushion.

Frederick leans into Will as the others raise their voices in quarrel. Whispers, "You okay?"

"Um," Will breathes. He pauses, looking down at the plush carpeting. He would ideally like to leave. Perhaps if he told Frederick he was sick, then—

"Hey, Kade," Brian calls, the light tone ringing through unrest, "can we get some wine to go with these?" He raises the plate of olives, thereby distancing them from Freddie. She glares at him from behind.

Kade slaps the meeting agenda on her lap. "Brian, we have a *lot* to cover—"

Will stands from the couch, which seems to startle Frederick. "I'll get it, Kade," he says and his voice sounds perhaps too resolute. But he needs time alone. His skin is smoked through by Hannibal. If he can gather himself, perhaps he can last the rest of the meeting.

Kade shrugs, motioning through the living room archway. "The wine pantry is back through the kitchen." As Will nods and is side-stepping his way between legs and the coffee table, she tugs on his sleeve. Lowers her voice: "And don't get any of the expensive stuff."

Brian cries, "I can hear that!"

"And?"

Will heaves a sigh and leaves the room, briefly waving back to Frederick. He hates to leave the man alone like that but if he didn't get out of there in quite a hurry, the churning within him might have manifested itself in him storming out of the house. Hannibal is not even the worst of it. It is Bedelia that Will cannot handle. Her cool gaze scanning the room, as if she is not intrinsically aware of Will. He crosses into the kitchen, and from there to the closed pantry door. There is a room such as this in his own home, one which is more or less empty save all of the new appliances. When he opens this pantry, it is micacious with wine bottles in the low lighting at the far end. He steps in and sighs.

He wonders if she saw his hair strand in her clip. He wonders what they said to each other after Will's departure.

Does she chastise him? Does she simply not care?

Will walks further into the pantry. He comes to the back where the wooden shelves cross against one another, forming diamonds in which wine bottles sit. There is red, white, pink. Will takes a chardonnay from one shelf and looks down at the label.

How can they stand one another?

The ajar door to the pantry creaks. Will jolts and turns on a heel in time to view Hannibal striding into the small room, gently shutting the door behind him. The latch catching is loud, even over the raised voices from the living room. Through the walls, Will can hear Beverly crying, "I'm not cutting it down!"

Will exhales slowly, clenches the bottle in his hands. "Go away. I don't wanna talk to you right now."

"Will."

"No," Will says, voice stilted. He clears his throat. "What're you doing in here anyway? Someone will wonder—"

"They will wonder nothing. They're far too engrossed with speaking on possible topiary acquisition." Hannibal leaves the door behind and walks further into the light. Will flinches as he moves, and then settles as Hannibal stands a reasonable distance away, his back up against the lined pantry shelves devoid of bottles. Will faces him and they are four feet apart.

Will looks down into the bottle he holds. The liquid sloshes, and he takes great care not to drop it, as if he were holding a newborn.

"Will, look at me."

"Last night was a mistake," he says to the bottle.

"Last night was inevitable," Hannibal says.

Will ires, pulling the bottle close to his chest. He looks across the scant space to Hannibal and is met with eyes of cassis. His stomach gels. "Don't— don't give me that," he says, voice settling to sigh the *ah* of *that*. "You did it, not me. It was completely your fault."

Hannibal's left canine shines in the light. "It happened just like you planned, Will." He exhales a breath of laughter, and his gaze rolls down Will's body – Will's stomach lurches, his stance adjusts – and places his hands in the pockets of his slacks. "You put yourself in a vulnerable position and practically dared me to take advantage. Now you are, at least in your mind, absolved of responsibility."

"I *am* absolved," Will says.

Hannibal lifts his shoulders lightly. "Will, it does not matter to me. Whatever makes you feel—" He pauses, smirks. "Comfortable. I would take any amount of blame you shift, all for the privilege of taking it again."

Will's spine is warm. He hugs the chardonnay even closer such that the bottom of the bottle digs into his breastbone.

"I don't want to," he says.

"Lying is allowed, Will, but not to me."

"I'm *not* lying. I don't want to do it again and I don't want to go any further. We're both married, Hannibal, it's got to stop."

Hannibal looks to consider this. He raises his left hand from its place in his pocket. The gold of his ring glints in the light. He studies it, moving his hand idly, and says, tentatively, "Will, last night I felt you. Trembling. Heard you making these sounds. You do realize, of course, that I didn't manage to take one piece of clothing off you, and yet you came like that." The hand returns to his pocket. His gaze wanders the pantry before returning to Will; Will, who is holding the bottle as if it is the only thing keeping him grounded to this reality. As if he might dissolve with its release. Hannibal says, "I could have you screaming in minutes. Ruined. You wouldn't even recognize yourself."

Will's thick eyelashes flutter. The bottle is slippery with his sweat. He feels the press of the other bottles into his back, between his shoulder blades.

Hannibal's lips twitch to smile. "Look at you. You can barely keep up the pretense. How much longer until your refusal quota is met? Must I ask three times? Is that the magic number, Will?"

"Fuck off," Will whispers, running fingertips lightly along the bottle's neck. He places the cork just under his chin, hugging in tighter and tighter. His entire body is flushed. "You

don't know what you're talking about."

"Did you give Matthew Brown this much resistance?"

Will shudders. "I..."

Hannibal lowers his gaze to the chardonnay that Will cradles, clings to, and says, "That's a very good year."

The doorknob rattles, the door opens, with such hurry that Will nearly drops the bottle. Hannibal makes no move but to look at the doorway and at Frederick who now stands in it, his expression heated and narrow. Will comes from his place immediately as if yanked.

"I was just coming ba—"

"What are you two doing in here? It's been ten minutes," Frederick says. He does not move from the doorway and when Will stands nearby with a smile, this does not soften him. His gaze is settled beyond Will's shoulder, at Hannibal, who looks only slightly amused and more bored than anything.

"The book," Will says, half-smiling. "We were talking about which book we're going to read next. Sorry, Ricky, but you know it's way more fun to talk about that than trees and peeping toms with Kade." He leans in, presses a firm kiss to Frederick's mouth. When he retracts, he tugs Frederick back through the door with him and into the kitchen. Frederick does not make further outward issue, but Will notices his gaze does not leave Hannibal. Throughout the remainder of the meeting – through Brian's cheers about the chardonnay and Kade's aghast cry about her good wine – Hannibal only gives his wife any notice. But Frederick's eyes on him burn with such intensity that Will can feel it, with such intensity that the whole of Kade's home might catch fire.

*

It is bare night; the lampposts lit and the crickets and cicadas in chorus throughout the cul-de-sac. The Neighborhood Association meeting ran overlong. Brian, Jimmy and Beverly grew red with drink and Kade and Jack fell into quarrel time and time again, with only Phyllis to gently separate them. The others fell into side conversations with their spouses or each other. Perhaps Frederick would have too fallen into idle chat with Will, if not for the fact that Will lied to his face.

Matthew Brown.

Frederick heard the name from Hannibal's mouth. From the second that Hannibal excused himself from the group, Frederick was counting the seconds. When seconds turned to minutes, he could barely keep himself seated. Conversation buzzed over and around him. He did not want to mistrust Will, but how long could grabbing a bottle of wine take? At length, Brian complained about Will's dallying, and Frederick rose immediately to go after him, even ignoring Bedelia's steady gaze upon him. He came to the pantry door to find it closed. His heart sped up. He heard voices, markedly Hannibal's and Will's, and just at pressing his ear, he could not make most of it out. But that name.

He would recognize that name amidst a hurricane.

He did not know what he expected to find upon stepping in. They stood as far from each other as was possible in the room. But something. Something in Will's stance. He held the chardonnay bottle in such a peculiar way. And his neck was scarlet, his eyes murky and dark.

Frederick held for the benefit of the doubt. He thought perhaps Will would use the book as an excuse in a public place and later, when they were alone, tell him that they were speaking on his past affair. But Will never did; not when they walked in the moonlight from Kade's home to their own, nor during dinner which was mostly silent from Frederick's perspective, just Will rattling things off in a haphazard manner over an under seasoned penne arrabiata. Not in the hours that have passed either.

Frederick has been thinking about this. He sits on the edge of their bed at nearing 11 PM, and from time to time he looks out at the window across from theirs. It is darkened at the moment. A light stands on in their bedroom on the nightstand nearest Will's side of the bed. From the bathroom, Frederick can hear the shower faucets turn, the water diminishing into nothing.

During the meeting tonight, Frederick initially did not know how to react to Bedelia being in the room. So odd to see someone with whom he shares his secrets, out in the open and the two of them not speaking as if they do not meet at 11:30 AM every weekday. As if Frederick has not told her he is in tatters over his beautiful husband.

The other day, during their meeting, she said, "Openness must be encouraged between you and your husband. If you both do not take ownership for what is currently going awry, failure is imminent."

Frederick looks out of the window again. The bathroom door opens, and Will walks out in a cloud of steam, his hair wet, his legs incased in pajama bottoms. Handprints bloom like flowers on his skin.

Will stops feet away. His eyes bright. "Something wrong, Ricky?"

Frederick sighs. He moves from the bed to the window, and takes the tassel in hand. He tugs sharply and the blinds both fall and flatten, barring their window from the other.

"We're keeping them closed," he says carefully. "And tomorrow I'm going to put up the curtains you bought."

Will looks at him closely. "They— they don't really match—"

"I don't care, Will, this has gone on for far too long."

"Ricky—"

"And I take responsibility for that," he says, taking a step in Will's direction. "We haven't said a word about it but it's been taking over my thought process, Will. That damn

window. I just— I—"

"Liked it?" Will asks, swallowing.

Frederick feels something. Something distinct that travels from his throat to his gut. "Y-Yes," he says. "I mean, I hated it, but I liked it, I— it's— listen, I want what's between us to stay between us. Is that agreeable to you?"

Will looks to loosen a bit. A smile comes to his features. "Yeah," he says.

"Good." Frederick nods. "Then, I also have to ask— what you and Hannibal were talking about in Kade's pantry."

Stiffened. Again. "I told you, the—"

"The book."

"Yes."

"The new book you two are going to read."

"Yes, Frederick."

"And that's all."

Will's expression sours. "That's all."

"Okay, now please tell me why you're lying."

"Frederick, I'm not—"

"I *heard* him, Will," Frederick says, perhaps louder than necessary. He takes stock of Will's resulting countenance which looks frightened of all things, his hands becoming jittery, his breath coming quick and now quicker.

"I can explain—"

"Please do, Will. I wish you would explain why you feel the need to lie about something like this. If you told him about Matthew, it's fine, I don't care, but you have absolutely no reason to lie to me about it." Frederick knows he should let Will speak, but he cannot, as the words pour forth, Will's expression changes slightly to something blank. "Because when you do this, Will— when you do this, it just reminds me that you lied before, and you know I have problems with you and Hannibal being friends and it is selfish of me, but I am trying to cope with it in my own way and when you do this, when you *do this*—"

Will comes to him, places his arms around Frederick's neck and hugs him, tight and close, the way he seemed to be hugging the chardonnay bottle in the pantry. Frederick stalls, and his voice wavers, and he places his arms around Will's waist. Even where the marks are, and they glow fervent and ired at Frederick's touch. But he touches them anyway. He does

not know how long they stand this way. His eyes are hot, and Will's hair is damp from the shower which in turn dampens his own.

Will murmurs finally into his ear, "I'm sorry, Ricky." He pauses, exhales. "I told him because I needed someone to talk to about it. And I know it upsets you to hear about it. Everyone... everyone could use a little introspection, right?"

Frederick thinks about Bedelia. "You're right."

"I shouldn't have lied. I just— I just."

"I should trust you."

Will doesn't say anything for a long time. Then, so soft Frederick nearly misses it: "It's okay. It's not your fault."

Chapter End Notes

Jeez.

Proposition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Frederick takes long showers on Sunday mornings. He's been doing it for ages, at least as long as Will has known him. At first Will found it curious – what was he doing in there? Relaxing? Thinking? Masturbating? Will remembers: he felt jealous at the very thought. His sexual appetite as voracious as it is, he has always thought Frederick's masturbation was a thing of the past, completely unnecessary. He brought this up once, a few weeks into their marriage.

"Well, I'm not doing that," Frederick'd said, slightly pink at the neck and nose. For even after all they had done, and all they still do, Frederick seems to never get over the slight embarrassment at it being spoken or alluded to aloud. It is both endearing and ridiculous.

Will frowned at him in the wake of a twenty minute shower. "What are you doing then?"

"Thinking," he said. "I like to think."

It has always been so – such that Will has oft accused Frederick of over-thinking. The man worries himself into tizzies over the slightest of disruptions. Will imagines him in there now, this present and July-saturated Sunday, the water streaming over him. His figure distorted through the glossed glass doors. And considering endlessly, perhaps, what they said to each other last night. Long after the lights went out and stilted sighs turned to prolonged moaning. When the moon was, for once, absent. That great presence lingering just outside the window, looking on. Just before sleep, Frederick shifted in the dark and said to Will:

"So. Nothing's happened between you."

Just barely – the lightest of lines from moonlight and the basswood blinds. Far less than illuminating.

Will said, "No, Ricky. Nothing's happened."

Will wonders if he said it the right way. With enough nonchalance and yet conviction that might mix to form something like truth. He wonders that as he comes into the dark cool of their walk-in closet. Behind a few boxes of yet unpacked winter clothes, Will rummages. He looks into a small black plastic bag he'd hidden away night before last. The clothes are wet from rain. Hannibal's clothes – those he wore that night, the night he tried to wash from his mind while he spoke to Frederick last night. While he lied.

He's heard somewhere before that this is how lie detector tests fail. If one is so assured they are telling the truth, if one is resolute enough, if one is delusional enough, if one does not want to get caught *badly enough*–

He takes the clothes from the bag. Listens, lightly, for the shower in the next room. It runs continuously. Will feels the trousers, the wrinkled material in hand, and remembers Hannibal grinding down into him. The force with which he did so lurid, and his hands gripping Will's hips to still him.

Will told Hannibal he is absolved.

He is so, he thinks. Hannibal pinned him, kissed him, coaxed him to orgasm in seconds flat. So quickly it might have been but a dream. Something that comes with fever and is in no way linked to reality. He can write it off as that. What he cannot do is write off Hannibal speaking on it in the pantry. Bringing fever dreams to the forefront of the world, presenting them to Will as if they are his problem to deal with now. How will such a dream color the waking world? Will does not think he could continue going to Hannibal's house with the mist of this dream hanging over them. A mist so thick one could get lost in it. One could want to explore it, to plunder fogged valleys and skirt grassed ridges, wet their toes in the morning dew.

The faucets in the next room turn. The water shuts off. Will swallows, stuffs the clothes back in the bag, and re-adjusts the boxes in front of it. He walks out of the closet.

*

"We don't have to go anywhere," Will says and Frederick has already decided he will not be swayed. He has thought about it for quite a long time during his shower and realized it is not fair to Will – that he is gallivanting throughout the week, primarily for work, yes, but Will rarely has places to go. And if he is truly honest with himself, which Bedelia has encouraged him to be, it bothers him that he and Hannibal went on some excursion for cookery paraphernalia. He stands in the sun-strewn kitchen amidst the pleasant scent of muffins from the oven. Will stands in pajamas still, and oven mitts embossed with red apples.

"I want to," Frederick says. "You do all this and it isn't right for me to keep you cooped up here."

"I'm not cooped up. You don't have me in a kennel, I can go out anytime I want."

"Yes, you can. Including now."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

Will snorts a bit of laughter. He goes to the oven, peers inside. He says, "Hmm. If I turn it off now, there'll be no saving them."

Frederick says, "A sacrifice I'm prepared to make."

Will glances back over his shoulder. Just the turn of his head and a raised eyebrow – that twitch of a smirk. Frederick feels his stomach gel at the sight of it. Will's body is in full glow, his runes present and accounted for. The one on his side burning brighter than the rest.

Frederick has been forced to look at it all weekend. He does not remember it being so insistent, so blaring. He does not remember it much at all. Will draws Frederick's attention as he pops off the oven mitts, throws them to the granite island. He tells Frederick he'll be dressed in a moment and leaves through the hall.

In minutes, Will is returned in jeans and a plaid shirt. They leave the house, locking the door behind them, and Frederick feels the light breeze as something much sought after. He needs this just as much as he thinks Will might. To get away from this neighborhood for just an afternoon. To leave behind the Neighborhood Association, the prying eyes, the looming leftmost house that harbors that ashen-haired tomcat.

Frederick clenches the keys just thinking about him.

"Ricky?"

Frederick swallows, turns from the door to see Will standing by the Escalade's passenger side.

"Come on," he calls, "let's go."

Frederick nods, follows his voice. In the cool of the car, the leather slides against the fabric of his slacks; Will turns the air conditioning on to full blast, fiddling with the vents until they are all turned completely toward him. As they back out of the driveway, Frederick looks up, over, at Hannibal and Bedelia's house. In the mid-morning sun, it is identical to theirs and yet apart, separated by thin veneers of shadowy ill intent.

But he knows he should stop projecting augers onto natural-world objects. That way lies ruin and Bedelia, in her capacity as his therapist, has bid him to solidify his world.

At his side, Will places the crown of his curled head to the vent on the dashboard. Allows it to blow through his hair and leans against his seatbelt. Frederick watches him for a moment as they roll to the stop sign. As they leave Sol Terrace.

*

They arrive at the Charles movie theatre in downtown Baltimore. Frederick asks Will what he would like to see and Will instead lists off what he would not like to see: sci-fi, fantasy, romance, horror—

"Will, you're naming everything people watch."

"Not *everything*."

Will's curls bounce in the sun as they stand on the sidewalk. The titles and corresponding times stand in black lettering overhead. Will grins at Frederick and takes his hand firmly in grasp.

"*You* pick then." Nuzzling at Frederick's ear. "We can sit in the back and we won't have to watch it anyway."

Completely insatiable. Frederick supposes that's half the fun. He lightly chides Will for this idea, and does as he is told. He barely pays any attention to what tickets he's ordered and he feels himself stabilize in some odd way as they move through the lobby and into their appointed theatre. The darkness of it, the cold plastic of the cup holders, the candy wrappers littered along the floor. The lights on the stairs. These things are so far removed from Sol Terrace that he feels himself renewed in them. As if these things that have been haunting him all settle in that place, like a tar pit, and here in the wilds of the city he is freed. He and Will both.

Throughout the previews, Will is more than amative despite their having had sex late into the night and again in an indigo dawn. His mouth on Frederick's neck, his hand massaging between his legs. Frederick winces, grabs him back, tries to be discreet, but then suddenly children are filing in with reluctant parents in tow and it is only now that Frederick notices the previews have been mostly for animated movies with vibrant colors and celebrity voice actors.

Will takes his mouth from Frederick as the row in front of them is occupied by twin girls and a father. In the darkening theatre, he eyes Frederick and whispers, "What'd you pick?"

"Uh—" Frederick fumbles in his pockets to try and find the tickets.

Will is laughing. He places a hand over Frederick's to still him. "Never mind," he whispers, and turns his head for the screen.

*

Throughout one hour and forty-five minutes, Will is peripherally aware of the movie.

But he thinks back. Yes, he thinks back to nearly three months ago now, when he was still an idle barista. When winter was being courted by spring, and customers brought the chill in with them. On their coats and scarves. Up to the bar to prickle the hair on Will's arms.

A man. Similar in height to him, and brown of hair. Flirting immediately, endlessly, and inciting in Will his own response – the flip of his curls, a sideways glance, a cocked hip against the counter.

What do you want?

You.

The lava-pool in Will's stomach that slid to his groin. Girls in his own green uniform giggling behind him, looking for a second, then away. Will brushing it off, brushing him off. And going home with that surging sensation, that which has always come from the lavish attentions of men. Sodden with sexuality. He could wear it like a garment. Will coming home to toss the garment off, using it to rope his husband into bed.

Again again again. Each day.

What do you want?

You.

You.

You.

How many times does he refuse? What is the magic number? Is it three? Surely that is enough. One does not receive a medal for private good deeds. That is the nature of them – uncatalogued, unrewarded. The sensation of lava like the core of a star. Burning to a degree so high.

He let it flow: from the back of the building to a red-and-rust Honda which sat under a copse of overhanging trees. The backseat stale-smelling and still slightly warm from daytime light. Will on his back. The feeling of hands on him, hands not of his husband, like fire-branding. Each placement overwrought and unnecessary. His knees to his chest. Lips pressing to his and the prickling along the back of his neck to know that every one of his coworkers knows just where he is, knows just what he is doing.

And more than that, perhaps – the man's eyes on him, a satiation.

Will gripping back.

You have wanted me.

Am I not kind for bestowing myself?

Eight years in culmination. Eyes on him, eyes all around him. How many men have wanted this? How many men have dreamt of this, daydreamed, and nightmared, Will's body encasing them? How many men has he kept up nights?

Coming. Stuttering. Wincing. The darkness so sugar-sweet dissipating and the world, sharp and real, rushing recklessly to the foreground.

*

His face:

Soft, smooth, but for the stubble at his chin and jaw line. Will rarely shaves complete. Upturned to the screen, the colors of it dancing across his face. Lighting his cheeks up blue, lighting his eyes up red. That handprint against his chin a dull throb. Eyes open and blinking sedately at the screen. Is he watching this? Is he really watching this? Some child's movie about a bear that practices karate. Within his eyes is a depth that gives no hint to what he may be thinking – he is perhaps a million miles away. But the warmth of his hand – securely fastened in Frederick's own – is something tangible and here, and for the moment, or perhaps it is only an instant, Frederick panics, he feels it so sharply and heatedly, like an unexpected shot to the arm, and so he squeezes Will's hand gently enough yet forcefully enough.

Will blinks. Exhales shallowly, and looks to his side where Frederick sees himself in his husband's eyes.

Frederick mouths: *Hey*.

Will smiles. Mouths: *Hi*.

*

Afternoon turns to evening. The sky over Baltimore is pink strewn with purple clouds. The sun half-hidden as it sinks below the skyline. Some meal in a five-star restaurant across town just finished, Frederick's mind in a blur of unease. He realizes this unease has much to do with his imminent arrival back home – *their* imminent arrival. Strange, but he can understand it. As he is with the second floor basement in the hospital – that place where the mercreature resides – he feels anxiety upon approaching. So too is it with Sol Terrace. Returning to that place, with its open windows and their open-eyed neighbors, is something that holds for him no comfort.

And it must stop. How can he live this way – caught between two places where he cannot find any peace?

Will seems high of spirits – his gaze ever-wandering towards the horizon, or a tree's lush leaves or a cicada along a branch. When they drive into the dip of their neighborhood, the dusk is alive with fervent noises. Whirring, crying of insects. A bird cawing overhead. And from Luna, Frederick can hear a high-pitched shout, one made fully in play. A dog's bark.

Frederick stands in the driveway, looking at their two houses.

Will says, "I smell like popcorn still," and unlocks the door. He says he must shower. And whilst he does so, Frederick sits in their orange-lit living room and watches the sun go down. He thinks about Will's blank eyes during the movie. He wonders what Will thinks about – what things lurk in the fresh valley of his mind? And how far does he go to meet those things? And what shape do they take?

Mercreatures live on land, in some cases. They crawl up from the deep and angry sea and take residence in neighborhoods and they look, to anyone else, like people. But they fill your head with briny thoughts, and your lungs with seaweed. And in your eyes, in *his* eyes, tiny grains of sand pressurize to form an obsidian pearl.

Frederick hears the shower continue on and he rises from the couch, leaves the house.

Through the grassy ravine he travels, and upon sandcrete stepping stones. He stands at the door to his neighbor's house and rings the doorbell. Only the Bentley rests in the driveway, the Audi off somewhere. The lights are on upstairs. It takes a moment. Frederick hears footsteps, soft and calm.

The door opens.

Frederick inhales briefly. Hannibal is before him, in grey slacks and a white shirt, unrolled at the sleeves. His hair lax at his forehead. In the dying day, the last of the light seeps into his eyes. They are wine-colored.

"Frederick," he says. "What a surprise."

Frederick cannot tell if this is sarcasm. He nods. "Sorry to bother you. I—" He eyes back at his own house. The upper floors, where Will is waterlogged and gorgeous. "Listen." He looks back to Hannibal, up at him as he leans in the doorway. "I know you're Will's friend."

"Yes."

"I also know about the women who lived in this house before us."

Hannibal's throat moves. The bob of his swallow. "I see. I'm surprised you would engage in neighborhood gossip, Frederick."

"You're saying it's a lie."

"I'm saying embellishments might have been made."

Frederick takes note of his off-cast gaze. Shadows move down as the sun diminishes. "I don't think so," he says. "But it doesn't matter. I'm just asking you to be— considerate. I guess you know about what's gone on in the recent past with Will. In light of this, I think you could understand that I have reservations."

Hannibal pauses for a long moment. During which he only stares into Frederick's eyes and something icy is there, just below the surface of calm waters. Shadows move ever on. Finally, he says, "You should be proud, Frederick. Will has demanded I be nothing short of a gentleman."

"He shouldn't *have* to demand that, is the point here, I believe," Frederick says, and he shudders to think of what had to transpire between them before Will made this demand. "You should know not to make passes at other people's spouses. You're a grown man with a wife of your own."

"Are you accusing me of something specific?"

"I'm telling you to spend more time with your spouse and less time with mine."

The porch light flickers twice, then turns on. In this, they are both of them illuminated.

Hannibal says, "Will comes here of his own accord. I do not force him." He pauses, and slides one hand against the smooth wood of the jamb. "It is your prerogative to dissuade him. But I myself—" He smiles. "I find his company pleasurable."

Frederick grits his teeth. His eyes lighting ethereal green. "How are you such a child? You really think playing around like this is funny?" His voice rising like late-day heat and he

is only peripherally aware when neighbors begin to peer out of their doors and windows. "Well, it isn't funny. It just shows me how little you actually have to do and that you have an astonishing lack of empathy. So I'm going to repeat myself— be a bit more considerate." He cannot help it, he jams his pointer finger into Hannibal's chest before he quite knows what he's done. "And while you're at it, perhaps try to acquire some class."

Hannibal's gaze zeroes in on him.

*

Will has his hand pressed to his ear, suctioning to release the water from inside. He tries again and again, to little avail. Giving up, he moves from the bathroom into the bedroom and towels off his hair. The room is nearly dark. Will looks to the wide window which is blinded, and finds it odd. He will have to get used to it.

He pulls on jeans without underwear, and tosses on a shirt that may or may not be his. He should probably remove the unfinished and possibly paste-like muffin batter from the oven. Coming downstairs, his feet feel warm against the cold wood. He looks around for Frederick in the living room and does not find him. Into the kitchen, where the light is on, and it is full dark outside.

Frederick sits on one of the stools at the island. Held to his face is a bag of frozen peas. When he seems to notice Will's footsteps, he jolts, and turns slightly away.

"What happened?" Will cries, rushing forward. He takes his hand to the bag on Frederick's face, and there follows a slight struggle in which Frederick is murmuring for Will to let go, he's fine, and Will yanks the bag away to find Frederick's left eye purple. "Jesus, what the hell *happened*? I was upstairs for fifteen minutes!"

"Will, it's all right—"

"If you don't tell me, Ric—"

"I just," he says and sighs heavily. "I just had a, uh, a talk with Hannibal, and things got— a little heated."

Will blanks for a moment. "*Hannibal* did this to you? Wait, you mean he came *over* here?"

"Not, uh, not exactly." He gently takes the bag back from Will and replaces it against his eye. "I went over there. I shouldn't have, but—" He lowers his voice. "It gets to me, Will. I know you haven't done anything. But Hannibal has, many times, of that I'm sure. But I shouldn't have made such blatant accusations, and I know I was rude."

Will feels something in him. Sharp and cold. He turns on his heel and leaves the kitchen, to go to the foyer and toes on his sneakers at the door.

"Will? Will, where're you going?"

"To talk to him."

"Will, you really don't need to—"

"Stay here," he says, and shuts the door behind him. The lampposts burn brightly at the sidewalk, and the trees sway with a perfumed breeze. The porch light of Hannibal's house stands on, like Will's own. And he notices the Audi in the driveway is absent, leaving Hannibal's Bentley standing alone. Will bangs on the front door.

A moment passes. Perhaps two. Will starts banging again and upon the second contact of his fist to the door, it opens, and his hand stops just short of connecting with Hannibal's broad chest.

"Ah, Will," he says. "Is this some tag-team endeavor to antagonize me?"

"Fucking shut up and get in the house," Will says, allowing himself inside and shutting the door behind him. In the low lighting of the foyer, with the unicorn standing white and wild behind, Will stares up into Hannibal's overly amused expression. Will is aware of the windows on either side of the house, particularly through the kitchen where this one looks into his own. He walks forward, Hannibal walking slowly back, until they come to stand just below the grand painting, beneath the arch of the staircase. "The hell is wrong with you?" he asks, clenching fists at his sides. "You *punched* him?"

"He was getting a bit unruly."

"I don't care— *do not touch him*. If he wants to press charges against you, I'm not going to talk him out of it."

"He won't."

"How do you know?"

Hannibal heaves a sigh, and turns his neck; in this, it pops. He looks back at Will with something verging on boredom. "This would not have been the first time I've had such encounters."

Will releases a strained laughter. "Right, oh. I forgot. You're a pro at this."

"And what, exactly, is this?"

Will quiets. He traces the lines of Hannibal's face with his gaze and takes a step forward, leaving a foot of distance between them. He pauses here, and submits himself to Hannibal's fervent examination of him. His smooth pink upper lip rising back from his pointed teeth. Will slides his foot farther, and moves himself with it. Halves the distance.

Will says, searching that ebon gaze, "You are reckless."

"It may seem so."

"Your wife may be okay with you being the way you are," Will murmurs, his head slightly lolling, "but Frederick isn't like her. So, if— if you want to do this—" he exhales, shuddering, "You have to be really very discreet."

Hannibal's very mass heavies and Will feels it like a tidal wave. Hannibal moves towards him, moves aside him, simultaneously switching their positions with nothing but intent. Will walks backwards until he is up against the wall, breath expanding his lungs and holding them open. Hannibal but an inch apart from him along every plane of their bodies, his hands flat against the wall on either side of Will's hips.

"You have yet to answer me," he says. "What is this?"

Will swallows. Relaxes back into the wall. His eyelids slide half-shut as Hannibal's mouth moves close to his own. Close, but just away. Their bangs of ash and darkness mingling.

"I think," Will breathes, "we need to. It'll be— all I can think about." He shudders again. "If we don't."

Hannibal is nodding.

"But," Will adds, "you need to apologize. To Frederick. For what you did."

Hannibal's hands sliding against the wall. Rubbing into the marble. He continues to nod.

Will's throat clicks. "Do it, then— then, if you do, I'll— I'll come over tomorrow."

Their mouths holding slightly open.

"You— you get me?"

Hannibal's blunt nails scratching down the wall. He is nodding.

"Say it— *say* you do."

He says, nearly into Will's mouth, "I *get* you."

Will's swallow is loud in his own ears. He lifts his hands, and takes them to hold just an inch apart from Hannibal's chest. Strokes the air there as if it were Hannibal's bare skin, and watches the man's breathing through his shirt, the quiet undulation. Takes his hands slowly around the curve of muscle at each bicep and caresses the air there as well. He does not know if Hannibal is watching. He does not know if Hannibal's eyes are open. Then— Will thinks he is watching. Hannibal takes his hands, it seems with great labor, from the wall and hovers them over Will's hips. Then one hand just away from his zipper, and they hold their bodies very still, every artery pulsating in this still frame. Will wets his own lips and is aware he has been here too long.

"I'm— I'm leaving now," he says. Takes his hands back to his sides. Hannibal pauses for a moment, then takes a large step away. Will feels air rush into his lungs, but he moves quickly around the man, for the door. "Remember what I said." He looks back. Hannibal stands half in the shadow of the staircase. "I want him to have an apology. You better sound really fucking sorry."

"A profuse apology," Hannibal says. His eyes give off a fox-shine. "Of course."

Will nods, and opens the door.

*

He should not have let Will go over there by himself. He hardly knew how to stop him, he seemed unswayable in his gaze. Frederick has been counting the minutes, and for a second it occurs to him he should go after him. But he recants, thinking, if no one stopped him from going over there, far be it from him to stop Will.

And the thinking of it causes his face to burn red. How many people were leaning out of their front doors and spying behind sheer curtains? When Frederick reeled home, he saw briefly Jack and Phyllis and of course Kade at the end of the dip. Whoever else saw had by then diminished into their homes.

Frederick continues to sit on the kitchen stool. The peas have long since grown lukewarm and he has switched it out for a bag of pearl onions. The front door opens and Frederick straightens immediately.

"Will?"

Will comes in, smelling of outside. Grass and hyacinths. Frederick stands from the stool, kicking it back with his heel. The onions half on his face.

Will comes to him, tugs at the bag. "How is it? Do you feel all right?"

"I feel fine," he says, brushing the hand aside. He does not, in truth, feel completely fine. But Will does not need to know this. "What happened? He didn't touch you, did he?"

"No, he didn't." Will shrugs. "I just chewed him out a bit. And I told him I won't be hanging out with him anymore. You were right— I should get some new friends." Will is looking aside, to the darkened window. Half of his face is obscured for the bag at Frederick's eye. "He's a dick."

"Yes, well." Frederick raises an eyebrow. He barely knows what to say. It would be poor form to show too much joy at this. "I mean— you don't— I'm not telling you to not—"

"I know, Ricky," he says. He turns for the refrigerator. And his body is silhouetted by the light as he rummages around. "There must be something better for that bruise in here. Like... steak? Does that sound good?"

This is just a bad idea conga line.

High

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Frederick feels as if he is in some strange dream. A good dream, perhaps, but no less fringed by an ominous air. Beige curtains were haphazardly arranged in the bedroom last night, and for this the room changes in atmosphere. In the morning, he comes from the steam-filled bathroom to find their bed empty. He is used to re-rousing Will who would still be encased by sleep, one arm hanging over the side of the bed, a tuft of curls rising from under the sheets. But he hears noise downstairs.

He dresses, and tries not to look into the mirror. Last night felt like a dream as well. Frederick has never been punched before. He's had tussles with friends in his youth – playground fights that were more amateur wrestling than anything. Frederick remembers coming home one day with a busted bottom lip which he'd done himself, rolling away from a playmate in the middle of a grapple. He banged his face into a concrete step just off the playground. His mother was furious; she wanted someone to blame, anyone. Frederick told her, again and again, there was no one to blame. No one but him.

He looks at the purple-blue that surrounds his left eye and wonders if he is to blame for this as well. Though, he supposes, if going a few days telling whoever asks that he walked into a doorframe is the price he must pay for Will forcing distance between he and Hannibal, then so be it. He would do it again, if that's what it took. Blacken *both* eyes, yes, even that.

He straightens his blue tie, and descends the stairs.

The scent of pecans and maple syrup permeates the first floor. Frederick arrives in time enough to watch Will turn off a stainless steel waffle iron and reveal a broad white plate stacked high with waffles.

Frederick says, "I didn't even know we had a waffle iron."

Will shrugs, approaching the island with the plate and syrup. "Part of that three thousand dollar bill."

"Oh, right."

They taste delicious. They are warm, light, perhaps the pecans are a little burnt. The coffee is bitter but Frederick has found himself growing accustomed to it. Bailey brings him normal coffee in the mornings at times, and it is calm, sedate, what he would ideally drink. Of late, he nearly finds it disagreeable, though he is not completely agreeable to the sort he currently drinks with Will. He finds his taste buds in a limbo.

Everything is changing, he thinks.

Could it all be for the better? He dare not hope.

At the door, Will is leaning into Frederick. Kissing him in such a way – slow, measured, in this way that Frederick has had to show him over the course of their years together. Will's mouth on Frederick's bottom lip, sucking, the very hint of teeth. Tilting his head one way, and for a breath, tilting his head the other. Hands gently held on Frederick's chest, one fiddling with the silk of his tie, the other flat. Frederick loses himself for a moment. For a moment he does not want to leave the house. Will tastes like syrup.

Upon parting, Frederick is hazy-eyed and holds light to Will's hips. "I don't want you to be lonely," he says, and kisses Will again. "Phyllis would love to have company, if you're interested."

Will leans down and kisses just over Frederick's shirt collar. He mutters something about that sounding nice. Frederick smiles, rubs at Will's red-blinking side, and says he has to be off. He is almost out of the door and at the threshold, Will grabs his wrist.

Frederick turns back.

Will says, "Hey. Have a good day."

He smiles again, can hardly help it. "You too."

The door is shut behind him at length and he travels over sun-warm sandcrete and cement to the Escalade. He has barely come to it, popping the lock with his keys, before he hears another door open, close by. Frederick looks up to find Hannibal walking from his house, immaculate in the early morning sun. Dressed in slacks and a deep blue button-up. His Bentley stands alone; the Audi left but minutes ago.

Frederick inly groans. He does not want to speak anymore to this man. He wishes his house would fall victim to a sinkhole. He could just get in his car and drive away. But something tells him that would be seen as cowardly and so he stands, most likely looking morose as anything, and cannot help tapping his foot against the pavement.

"Good morning, Frederick," Hannibal says. As if they speak every morning. As if Frederick is not black-eyed by way of Hannibal's knuckles.

"Yeah," Frederick says.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Not really. Some of us have things to do, Hannibal."

Hannibal's eyes are bright in the sun. "I have something to do as well. Fear not, this will not take long. I simply wanted to apologize about yesterday evening." He has his hands clasped behind his back. Frederick eyes him wryly – is this his way of showing he has no intentions of violence this time? "It was horribly inappropriate of me."

"Yes. Well. It was."

"I hope you will not hold it against me."

"If this is about me possibly pressing charges—"

"Not at all." Hannibal straightens his posture even further. "If you choose to, that is your right."

Frederick heaves a sigh. "I'm not going to."

"Then you must allow me to repent in some way."

"Hannibal, you don't need to—"

"Punch me, Frederick."

Frederick nearly drops his keys. He loses their grip for only a moment, then secures them. And he looks at Hannibal, checking his face for any sign of some joke. He seems airy, Frederick may even say cheerful, but does not seem to be joking. Frederick rolls his eyes and says, "Dear God, I'm not going to do that. I'm not some kind of savage, and I honestly don't want anything to do with you. If you want to repent, do it by leaving us alone."

And with that, he moves to open the driver door of the car. He looks up at the windows of his own house and wonders if Will forced Hannibal to apologize. It seems like something he would do. He will have to tell him later this was unnecessary. Just before Frederick shuts the door behind him, he looks again at Hannibal who is standing very still, and the morning colors his eyes hazel.

"Yes, of course," he says.

Frederick shuts the door. He slowly backs down the driveway in tandem with Hannibal leaving to return to his own home. By the time Frederick is at the stop sign, he looks in the rearview mirror to find Hannibal's front door shut once more.

Punch me, he thinks, shocked by the juvenile nature of the offer. *Jesus Christ*.

He is possibly the most irritating person Frederick can ever remember meeting. He puts Kade Prunnell to shame. Frederick has no idea what Will ever saw in him. He doubts he'll ever know.

*

Will feels as if he is in some strange dream.

He has come to stand here, though how he has come he does not rightly understand. It can only be parsed in moments, caught like photographs, taken by one who lingers at the edge of time.

This morning:

Will watched from on high, in a yet unfurnished guest bedroom at the front of the house. As Frederick walked out to his car, Hannibal approached him from his own side of the yard. Even from such a distance, Will could see Frederick's stance stiffen, his blatant unease.

As if to assuage this, Hannibal held his hands behind his back. They spoke, though not for long. And Frederick looked as if he would have rather been anywhere else.

Will still does not know if it was the right thing. Should he have forced an apology? Or let it alone?

When Frederick finally shut the car door and began rolling down the street, the sun passing over the black finish of the Escalade, Hannibal turned to look up at the house. Almost directly at Will, as if he could sense him hiding behind the blinds. He tilted his head ever so slightly in the sun. Hands still held behind him. As if to ask, *Good enough?*

Will snorted and left the window. He milled about the house, and everything he touched caused his fingertips to tremor. He waited throughout the morning, and tried to ignore the house to his left. Until midday came and the gardeners left the neighborhood. Will busied himself with idle pursuits, and quickly dressed. Upon leaving the coolness of his own house, he immediately felt something, like eyes on him. Whether from Hannibal's house or his other neighbors, he could not tell. It seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Birds on the power lines watched him. There was shouting from Luna, happy cries of children in the rising heat of the day.

Will knocked on the door. In the time it took for Hannibal to answer, he rethought this a thousand times. A thousand and one. A thousand and two.

He opened the door, dressed as he had been on the lawn. Hair lax, eyes black as starless night. And Will could feel it: his stare thick as smokestacks and on Will, all *around* Will.

Will made no move to come into the house. Nor did he receive greeting. He tilted his head upward, swallowed. Said, "Was it good? Your apology?"

"Very," Hannibal said.

Will paused again. "And are you—?" He raised an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

"Incredibly."

"Liar," Will said.

"Surprised you could tell." Hannibal stood back the smallest bit, and opened the door wide enough for Will to step through. When Will made no move to, perhaps even took a step back in fashion of an unsure colt, Hannibal slowly nodded his head back. Once. And with gravitas. As if to say, *Get in*. Will's breath stuttered at his throat, and he did so, he went in.

He isn't sure what exactly was to happen next. He'd thought about it countless times since propositioning Hannibal the night prior – could barely get it out of his head. The prospect was at once terrific and terrifying and when he looked into the mirror, he thought he could see horror in his eyes. He tended to Frederick's wound, cooked dinner, brushed his hair until each curl was satin smooth, but he was present for none of it. He thought about that

moment in so many different ways that they began to run together. Him stepping into the house. Hannibal dragging him into the house. Hannibal shoving him against the wall. Hannibal fucking him on the foyer floor. Hannibal not even allowing him to remove most of his clothing. So many different ways.

Yet he was wrong on each account. How could he have foreseen this?

Presently, he stands in the master bathroom. The room is cool, bright with lighting. Through the closed door, Hannibal waits in the bedroom. Will has been given express direction. It is obvious to him now that Hannibal has given this mass amounts of thought, more thought than Will ever has. Will has shorn himself of his clothing; they sit in a heap on the floor. He is naked in the broad mirror, but for the jewelry he wears. Bedelia's golden bangles about his wrists, her rings, her anklets, a string of pearls heavy at his neck. Gold barrettes in his hair, two of them, holding back a few curls each. He stares at himself in the mirror. His breathing is quick and he tries to stem it. His palms moist.

He tells himself he has to do this. If he doesn't, he won't be able to stop thinking about it. The possibility of that feeling again, what he experienced in that man's backseat. Once, and not again.

He looks at the door, shudders a breath outwards, and moves his lips to mouth: *Once, and not again.*

Shuts the light off. Goes to the door and opens it.

Will is confronted first with the sight of the room at large, but nothing matters so much as Hannibal sitting with his back to Will; he is still fully dressed and at rest on the ottoman at the foot of the bed. The wood of the floor is cool along the flats of Will's feet. The curtains drawn completely such that the room, though it is midday, is darkened, chilled. Goosebumps line Will. He swallows, feels a bass at his stomach, and waits at the door. For Hannibal to turn around.

But he doesn't. He continues to face forward, and leans back just a bit on one hand. With the other, he crooks a finger into the air, signaling Will to come forth.

Will opens his mouth to speak, then thinks better of it. He stills his slight shuddering and walks placidly, as if upon a tightrope, or along the back of a couch – as he did when he was young, pretending the carpet was lava, boiling below, ready to swallow him if he made but the slightest misstep. As if it would melt the gold he wears, and his bones, until they were indistinguishable from each other. When he comes to stand directly before Hannibal, he has that precarious state of mind. His chest heaving with unwanted nerves.

Hannibal looks up at him. Slowly. From squirming toes to gilt ankles. From calves carved of marble and thighs lightly prickled with hair. His blushed groin which grows increasingly rigid under the murky gaze. Stomach, arms dripping with gold. The necklace that covers the dip of his collarbone. And the barrettes in his hair, placed haphazardly as Will hands shook in the bathroom.

Will waits until Hannibal's gaze meets with his own. "Is this what you had in mind?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal says.

"How do I look?"

Hannibal's eyes are midnight. "How do you think you look?"

Will snorts softly. "I want you to say it."

Hannibal lightly raises an eyebrow. He smiles, or it looks like a smile, but changes too quickly into something unidentifiable. Lifts a hand to touch the left bracelet Will wears. Moves his hand slowly to hover just at his hipbone. Then lower, wavering over flushed flesh, and Will's eyelashes flutter to feel radiating heat. He fights down any whimpers his body longs to make.

Hannibal stands suddenly, and Will cannot help his stance once again: as it had been at the front door. Slightly unsure, taking a half-step back. Then raises his chin to allow Hannibal a continued look. Hannibal's hand ghosts up his chest, shoulder, only the warmth of a would-be touch. His voice is low when he says, "Devastating."

Will is agreeable to the conviction in his voice. He says, almost wondering, "I've never been... with a married man before. Not even when I was younger."

Hannibal's hand is flickering along the ends of Will's curls. His eyes on the barrettes, their shine reflected in his gaze. "And here I assumed there were no more firsts to take."

Will makes a bleat of disgust. "If you think that's funny, Hannibal, I swear to G—" His words completely lost to the ether as his head is yanked back by Hannibal's hand gripping the majority of his hair. A tight clamp which exposes Will's throat fully. Cords of muscle standing out on either side, and Will's eyes on the ceiling, wide, wide on the ceiling.

"You swear to what?" Hannibal's nails down his scalp, ripping a few strands out. "Finish what you were saying, Will."

"G-God."

Hannibal releases. Will's sight is blurry, as he readjusts his head, his shoulders just a bit aching from the suddenness of the gesture. Hannibal is hardly in focus before Will sees his smile— two, moving, until they are finally one.

His hand lingering at the pearls along Will's neck. Running a rough fingertip along the gems. "Do you think," he asks, studying them, "it would be all right for me to touch you now? Would you last more than a few seconds if I did?"

"I'm not—" Will shudders, "a child."

"Though you were last time." Rolls one pearl against Will's skin. His breastbone.

Will is achingly rigid, and knows Hannibal has taken full notice. "You're such—" Hannibal tugs lightly at the pearls. "—such a fucking dick. I don't know why I'm here."

"Then let me show you why."

Will is barely aware of it— Hannibal's hands under his backside, the hoist up, and when Will's legs are suddenly wrapped around Hannibal's waist. Will's mouth against Hannibal's, open, in blessed surrender, his hands on the man's sturdy shoulders, biceps, gripping at his shirt hard enough to tear, as if he were hanging from a ledge above an abyssal sea. Hannibal's tongue and teeth, his hands, all of these things threatening to drag him down. Will sighs, shudders, tells himself he won't come, won't come, *will not*—

This transpires in less than a second. And, following, Hannibal turns with Will to the bed, shucking himself of Will with a rough quickness and this results in Will landing on the bed unceremoniously. Hannibal is standing, smirking, as Will lies amidst blankets and covers, leaking heavily. Hannibal's shirt sports a wet spot simply from their brief contact.

Will immediately begins to whine: "Hey, Hannibal—"

"Be quiet, Will."

Will is amenable to whining about that too, but stalls at the sight of Hannibal deftly undoing the buttons of his shirt. Will watches the first, the second, all of them go, and what is revealed he finds he has to look away from lest he fidget himself into orgasm. The prospect is highly likely at this point. He feels unstable, that tightrope he walked in on now just a summit only one square foot in surface. His body strung tight and every muscle used to keep himself from falling off. The bed smells of Hannibal and Bedelia. He breathes in deep and, looking off, finds himself startled by a mirror on the other side of the bed, against the wall. It is body-length and slim, but he is angled enough to see his legs in it, one bent, the other flat against the bed. Will's breathing speeds up.

The bed dips for Hannibal's added weight. Will releases a trembling whine despite himself, and looks to see Hannibal hovering above him in naught but dark blue boxers. The outline of him hanging heavy and thick and Will pulsates again. Hannibal takes notice at this and smiles again, his bangs hanging down as he is on his hands and knees above Will. Will closes his eyes, opens them. Breathes in deep.

Not yet, he tells himself.

He has yet to allow himself to take Hannibal in; once centered, it seems safe. The comforters of the bed are soft, almost softer than his own at home. He looks up into an eternity gaze, then allows his eyes to wander to a hard-muscled chest which is curled with ocher hair. His veined forearms on either side of Will's head. This sense of encasement. Will cannot remember feeling this infinitesimal prior.

Hannibal dips down, opens his mouth to Will's neck and laps a hot stripe up the pulse.

Will shivers with it. "What're you doing," he murmurs, too dazed to add a question's lilt.

"Nothing."

Again he does so. His mouth wetter than before. Again. Such that even Will's hair is wetting. Will is throbbing between his legs, and distantly he is reminded that this cannot and should not take all day.

"H-Hey," he murmurs. "Hey. Hurry up, would you."

Hannibal snorts softly under Will's jaw. He continues to lick, this time in such increments that the sun will go down before he is quite finished.

Will begins to struggle but Hannibal simply lowers his weight immediately. All of it placed between Will's legs and the resulting contact, body-long, nearly jolts Will into orgasm. He grips at the covers, allows himself to rub one calf against Hannibal's.

"This— this isn't funny," he sighs, breath blowing at Hannibal's ashen hair, "Hannibal. Stop playing around."

At this, Hannibal takes one hand to wrap under Will's thigh, hiking his leg up. Will presses his lips together as Hannibal lowers himself, kissing quickly at Will's collarbone, the pearls that line it. He kisses ever lower, causing Will to leak and twitch in anticipation, and between each contact of flesh and mouth, he says, "My apologies. I've been known to play with my food before I eat it."

Will's breath hitches.

Hannibal hikes his other leg up, pushing them both fully back against Will's stomach. Gripping the backs of his thighs surely. His head dipping down, lower than rigid flesh, and Will keens in a stuttering breathless note as he feels Hannibal's tongue, flat, dripping wet—

Will is clenching with surprise, and attempting to at the same time allow himself to relax. He finds this difficult. Every lathe of the tongue, every slight hint of teeth at first causes his mind to reel. Very slightly, his eyes go back in his head, and for any sort of leverage he is holding onto the backs of his knees, taking reign of them away from Hannibal. At doing so, Hannibal takes his fingers to Will, pushing into him, opening him further to an all too eager tongue and Will's toes are crossing against each other, and he is swallowing down mouthfuls of saliva and hissed curses and Hannibal's name and every sort of blaspheme he can conjure.

Hannibal's mouth open. His lips, the undulation of his tongue, like he's kissing, and Will is trying to hold out but so too do his eyes cross, much like his toes, and Hannibal's fingers are moving inside him, a quick backward motion, like his head at the front door, like his motion when Will stepped from the bathroom, Will is—

"H-Hannibal, I can't— I'm gonna—"

Hannibal pulls all of himself away. Will is moaning "fuck fuck fucking what the fuck Hannibal" only to be met with a smug expression between his legs. Hannibal's mouth is

smearred with saliva.

Will still balances on the edge and he has had quite enough of playing. He rises to sit, pausing only briefly, fully ready to launch himself onto Hannibal. Hannibal has him by the neck before he's quite realized what's happened. The back of the neck, clenched with such a strength that it momentarily frightens Will. His mind completely blank as Hannibal uses one fluid motion to flip Will down and onto his stomach.

Will grunts with Hannibal's hand still against him. He is saturating the sheets with longing and his eyes are hazy, his gaze on the white pillows at the head of the bed. He recognizes what Hannibal means to do, as the man shucks himself quickly of his boxers.

Will grumbles, "How fucking romantic."

Hannibal is leaning low over him. Will can feel his stare again, on every inch of him, and it begins not only to coat Will but fill the entire room like helium. Like smoke. Dense, heavy. Hannibal leans a bit more to the nightstand, retrieving a bottle Will can only barely recognize as lubricant. When the cap is off, the scent is of lavender.

Hannibal's voice is slightly freeform, wondering, as if he is only paying Will's protests the barest of attentions. "You're not here for romance," he says, and coats Will anew with slicked fingers, then pausing to apply it to himself.

Will swallows. Something in him calms as he anticipates that feeling— that wonderful fullness. He arches his back slightly, spreads his legs wider.

"What am I here for?" he murmurs into the bedclothes.

Hannibal leans into him. Steady. Slow. He murmurs something into Will's hair which he cannot make out. Nor does he care to. He feels Hannibal, just the start of him, which is stretching Will in a way he had not prepared for. In a show of pure instinct, he clenches and curves his back, which Hannibal does not allow for. He forces the arch back into Will's spine and continues forward, as if Will is not in tremors beneath him, as if Will is not whispering *slow down, slow down—*

When he is perhaps a bit more than halfway, Will's eyes open wide on the sheets, his mouth dropped open in a small *o*. The prospect of more is too much, the stretch gone from simply heated to scorching, and he bucks back, then cries out. Hannibal is breathing heavily, chuffing hot breath against Will's scalp, and he is saying things that sound mangled, like some shadowy form of English, perhaps encouragement or things to settle Will, but none of it is making sense and Will cannot bear the pain a second longer—

"Hannibalfuckingeaseup—"

He places his hand back against Hannibal's hip to shove him off. Hannibal grabs it by the wrist, pins it over Will's head and in one motion he takes the back of Will's neck again, turns it so that Will faces the wall where the mirror is leaned. Will's eyes round on his own form and Hannibal's, and in this second it takes for him to take it in, Hannibal presses the rest of himself down, the roll of his hips complete with their bodies flush against one another.

Will's cry is lost, made real only by the barest of hoarse sounds. He watches, transfixed, as Hannibal slides back to half length. Then with a smoothness Will can feel, pushes back in. The small bit of light from the closed curtains travels along Hannibal's back; his shoulders, his biceps, all lightly gilded, such that he too looks encased in jewelry.

The pain is still present, but so far removed that Will does not concern himself with it. So too are removed any notions of time. This exists out of time.

Look:

Will arched so completely there is nearly a ninety degree angle at the small of his back. Hands clenched in the sheets above his head, held there by Hannibal's death grip. Curls bouncing with each thunderous thrust. Sweat beading along every surface of his body, Hannibal's body, *their* bodies which now work only slightly in tandem as Will is given barely any ground to move with or to Hannibal. Will's gaze on himself like Hannibal's gaze on him, and it saturates the room, along with every groan from Hannibal, every *fuck* and *Jesus* and *God yes* from Will, and this gaze is *grimy*, it is as thick as the scent of sex and as oily as the sweat along their shoulders. Perhaps the mirror is not a mirror at all but a window, and Will sees a young man who is stunning, breathtaking, devastating, and being devastated, and he catches this young man's stare beneath a thicket of curls and gold—

And his eyes are so terribly green.

Will makes a deep sound, deeper than the rest, and he comes into the sheets, grinding himself down as he does so, writhing beneath Hannibal with little care as to whether he is working in tandem or not. In his sunless orgasm, he feels the constant fullness inside him, like he has given Hannibal what he wants, and in this he has given himself what he wants and there is nothing greater than that, no higher high, no lower low.

At the last pulse of his orgasm, he becomes once more aware of the pain of Hannibal's torrid attentions and the slamming into him is ripping cries anew from Will. Once, twice more, and thrice—thrice more and at this moment, Hannibal is gripping Will so hard he may splinter and break. Will feels him coming, that throb. Hears him coming, that desperation in his voice which is only slightly muffled by his mouth in Will's hair. Will watches his entire body quake in the mirror. His hands abandoning Will's wrists and hip and wrapping his arms around Will's waist from behind, holding him amazingly still. Will cannot move. Can only grit his teeth until his gums ache as Hannibal pushes in full, more than full, overflowing, until he settles to quiet.

The room settles with him.

It clears, the smoke from their heavy gazes, though only slightly. Will is dizzy. He waits until he catches his breath, most of it, and feels Hannibal beginning to move on him, in him, which is nothing if not uncomfortable. Will feels a lick at the back of his neck.

Will swallows heavily, rubs the back of his hand against his mouth where he has been drooling. "Hey, get off," he mutters, shifting his legs.

Hannibal hums lightly, moving his fingertips along Will's flank.

"D'you hear me? Get *off- ah-*" Will struggles as Hannibal lifts and removes himself, perhaps too quickly. Will yips with his removal, and the emptiness only irritates him further. What fills him in Hannibal's place is a thimbleful of disgust and no small amount of regret. His eyes are ringed red.

"I heard you, Will," Hannibal says, rolling off to Will's other side. He lies on his back, resting one hand on Will's damp shoulder blade. "The entire neighborhood heard you."

Will thinks this is just ribbing, but it strikes a note of fear into his heart nonetheless. He moves a bit and feels a painful throb in his backside. Rubbing his forehead into the mattress, he knows this is not good. He shifts again, is met with the same pain.

"Fuck," he mutters. Looks over at Hannibal, who wears a lofty and faraway expression. "My husband is *far* more considerate than you."

Hannibal glances over at him. Reaches up and cups Will's cheek gently, threading his fingers through Will's hair. Dislodges one of the barrettes. His hand moves then to once again grab at the back of Will's neck and yank him closer in. He says, "You are not here for me to *consider* you."

Will looks at Hannibal. His dark eyes, his sweat-drenched hair. His mouth.

Will says, "Fucking animal."

Hannibal presses their mouths together. Following this, it is but a blur. Will is too antsy to stay around long, though he gets the distinct feeling Hannibal would be agreeable to him lingering in bed. Will doesn't know how Hannibal plans to get the scent out of the room, or if he is going to do laundry in a hurry. And he does not care. He cares only for getting home, and washing himself of it. Making dinner. Perhaps Frederick's favorite – mushroom risotto. As he stands in the foyer, beneath the unicorn with wild ire in its eyes, he looks up into Hannibal's gaze. They two are dressed, Will no longer jeweled and glittering, Hannibal no longer feral-eyed and gripping, and if one were to walk past from a distance, they might not suspect.

Looking up into Hannibal's face, Will says, "You were too rough." He feels soreness settle into every point of his body; every time he pushed back, every time he was shoved and angled, all of it is going to last in him for a day if not longer. "If he notices me walking funny—"

"Then do not walk funny."

"Asshole," Will says, voice limp with exhaustion. He thinks he can manage. He turns for the door, and as he stands in the open threshold, the sun warming his face, he hears Hannibal from behind.

"I've chosen another book," he says.

Will blinks at the sun. Looks back over his shoulder. "Fine."

Hannibal nods once, and Will shuts the door. He crosses the ravine to his home. He keeps thinking it, like a mantra: *Once, and not again*. Over and over does he think it, until it sounds like truth, or something that was meant to be truth.

*

Frederick cancelled his appointment with Bedelia during the morning. He spoke to the receptionist and said something came up at work – her tone was understanding yet suspicious. She was right to be so. Nothing came up. Frederick simply did not want to submit his face to Bedelia's lukewarm gaze. And so he apologized, and said he would get back to her with a better day and time.

He did not precisely feel any misgivings about shirking the appointment. He hid in his office most of the day as per usual, and his face stung but on the whole he was of high spirits. He thought to call Will and ask how things were going, but decided against it. If Will went to Phyllis, it would be his prerogative and Frederick does not want to be pushy about it.

Bailey was quite understanding. She did not mention the black-eye, though her gaze was at times drawn to it. She went about her duties cheerfully, perhaps feeding off of Frederick's good mood. He almost felt stable enough to give in to Abel Gideon's demands to see him. Almost. He thinks: *Perhaps tomorrow*.

Criminal or not, Abel Gideon is entitled to proper psychiatric care. Frederick knows this. He must gain some courage. Tomorrow. Always tomorrow.

He lagged on the way home. Wasn't aggressive driving, didn't switch lanes for a moment's burst of speed. He did not want to arrive at the same time as Bedelia. And his plan has worked, as he pulls down onto the sweet wooded lane of Sol Terrace, he sees that the Audi is nestled securely beside the Bentley. Frederick allows himself to smile, though that irritates his eye.

He parks. Looks up in the cooling night air to see both houses illuminated, his and Hannibal's. Something is on the wind, the scent of food, though from this distance Frederick cannot tell from which house it comes or what it precisely is. Further up the street, Kade Prurnell is checking her mailbox.

Frederick comes to the front door, unlocks it, fumbling his keys. He is greeted by the racehorse, that which he has only recently grown accustomed to. In its dark eyes is a strange expression of gloom.

"Will?"

"In here."

Frederick can tell now– that scent has come from this house. The kitchen window holds open, letting in a calm breeze, and carrying the scents of mushroom risotto out onto the street. Will stands with his back to Frederick for just a moment, running the faucet heavily into the sink basin. Then, on one toe as any ballerina, he turns around.

*

Will hadn't heard Frederick's keys for the running water. When he enters the kitchen, Will breathes in carefully, holds, then exhales. He can do this. He can do this. *Put it in your head*, he tells himself. *Will the Blameless. Will the Absolved*. He turns around on one toe, smiling, eyebrows aloft.

"Hey, Ricky. I made your favorite!"

Frederick is at the archway, unmoving, staring at him. His blue tie crooked.

Will tilts his head. "Ricky?"

*

he is red all over is red all over is red all over why is he red he is glowing red is glowing red red red

*

"Ricky?" Will presses. "You okay?"

Frederick jolts, exhales, and he looks to smile. He says, "Yeah, it smells amazing."

Chapter End Notes

Damn, I'm good.

Comedown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Frederick sits in Bedelia's office on Tuesday. He was on time for his appointment, perhaps a few minutes early. He sat quietly in the waiting room, with a closed magazine on his lap. A car horn blared just outside the building, and Frederick kept turning his head toward the wall, as if he might be able to see through it.

Bedelia called him in. She is dressed in sunset-orange which does something to her eyes, darkens them, deepens them. Her lipstick is bright red and she looks almost happy with the sun from the wall of windows cascading down her form. Her legs crossed as she sits apart from Frederick.

It is quiet for a long time. Frederick watches the tip of the Transamerica Tower for a moment, then, as if he'd forgotten something, turns quickly to see Bedelia too watching it. She tilts her head to meet his eyes.

"I'm going insane," Frederick says.

Bedelia continues in her silence. Perhaps as an invitation for Frederick to continue. But he does not. She clasps her hands in her lap and settles back. "What makes you say so?"

"He... is... red," Frederick says, nearly gasping the words, and with them comes the memory of last night, and the feelings rushing forth like sea foam on sand. He has not been able to voice this to anyone. But he came close. Standing there in the kitchen with Will at the sink, Frederick almost screamed in terror. Will's face. Will's gorgeous face no longer pale and pinked but red, bull-red, hot-red, star-red. Along his arms, his hands. His bare feet. And he spoke to Frederick in this way, as he had when those marks first appeared, in such a way that he could never know this red existed on him. A deformation only Frederick could see.

They passed the night as usual. Will making furtive glances at Frederick from under dark hair, still fussing over his eye. Frederick watched him with a dull sense of horror that throbbed with his pulse. He was terrified of the idea of having to have sex with Will looking like that. Like some kind of eldritch abomination. An abomination with beautiful woodland eyes.

Yet it did not happen. Whereas Will would normally gnaw on Frederick's ear nearing bedtime, perhaps even as early as post-dinner, Will seemed tired and did not initiate anything. Instead he positioned himself beneath the cool bed sheets. Curled up to Frederick's side, holding his arm like it was a stuffed animal, something of comfort. In the night, the darkness of the room, Frederick heard Will's breathing. Wakeful breaths at first, deepening and devolving into rhythmic sleep. When Frederick was sure he slept, he removed his arm from Will's grasp. And he threaded, so very gently, his fingers through his husband's hair. Parted the curls to reveal his scalp which too was lined red.

Frederick stared for a very long time. And eventually, he replaced his arm into Will's clinging grasp. And eventually, he met with sleep.

He tells this to Bedelia.

She says, "And what does this say to you?"

"That he has been—" Frederick grips his knee. "That he has— But it— It's *me*," he says, gasping once again, then gritting his teeth. Clouds pass over the sun, and shadows pass over their faces in the office. "It's my imagination. You cannot see— you cannot *tell*—"

"So you *think* he has been unfaithful, and thus these marks appear."

"But I *didn't* think so," he cries. "Yesterday. They only appeared yesterday. In the morning, *none of that was there*." He says this as if Bedelia is not in the room. As if he is alone. Speaking to his reflection in a mirror, or a pool. "And then at night— I-I was happy, thrilled, because I thought things were finally getting better."

Bedelia's eyes move now towards Frederick's left eye. "That," she says.

"Yes," Frederick says, the word clipped. "Your wonderful husband gave me this. The price of his leaving Will alone."

Bedelia blinks slowly. Then, shakes her head. She opens her mouth, only to close it.

*

At midday, the heat has reached a strange peak, both sweaty and uncomfortable. It seems that with the rainstorm last Friday, the weather has gone from pleasant and mild to unspeakably uncomfortable. Will stands sweating in it just in the time it has taken him to cross the street. From his home to that of the Crawfords'. He has passed beneath the great oak that stands in Beverly's yard two over, that which he has heard talk of. The shade it provided on the jaunt was little comfort. Will stands on their sandcrete doorstep after ringing the doorbell and he rubs the flat of one sweaty palm against the side of his jeans. A gnat buzzes in his ear. He twitches lightly.

Earlier:

Will crept to Hannibal's house in the early morning. Perhaps twenty minutes after both Bedelia and Frederick left their respective driveways. Will paced lightly in the foyer; the will-I-won't-I but a pretense. He told himself he would not. Firstly, that he was still sore (something in him responded, fervently, *A little pain never killed anyone*) and secondly that he had only done it so that he could stop thinking about what it would be like (that voice: *That endless void*) and thirdly, and most importantly, that this would break Frederick's heart—

No.

It would shatter it.

No.

Not even that. It simply would cease to exist.

This voice in him took this to consideration. Quietly. Will felt it ruminating. This strange thing that had taken up residence, it seemed, only at that precise moment. Or perhaps only made itself known then.

Finally, as Will lingered at the door, it said, in tone of dry reflection: *If you are very very careful.*

That's all it said. Then retired into Will once more, leaving him only with his unsureness, and the sun which greeted him at opening the door.

Upon arriving to Hannibal's home, Will barely had time to knock twice before the door was opened. Will could feel it; that murky sense of smoke seeping out from the house, into the brightened morning. The scent of cherries was on the wind. Will stalled once more at the door, and Hannibal bid him to step inside, and he did. Immediately as the door shut, Will said, "I'm not here to fuck." His voice giving off the same iffiness of his stance.

Hannibal eyed him for a long moment. Expression unreadable. "Of course not."

They had breakfast. Chicory coffee and pecan braid pastries, warm from the oven and broached by a maple-covered pecan. Will ate half of it in silence, unsure of what to say, where to begin or how to end it once he'd begun. Begun what? End where? All he could see in his mind was himself, in the mirror, covered in gold and being slammed into the mattress. He felt it all night long, that hot throb in his backside. He was dizzy and agitated well into morning. Frederick seemed not to notice.

As if Hannibal recognized his thought pattern, he looked across the table and said, "Could he tell?"

Will swallowed a mouthful. "You mean that we— no, I didn't walk any differently. No thanks to you."

Hannibal nodded. "And during sex?"

Will furrowed his brow. "During sex? We didn't have it."

"Why not?"

"How *could* I have? I was *exhausted*, you—"

"Will." Hannibal placed his butter knife down against the plate. The soft clank rang with a lark's call from outside the window. Will looked up at the patrician tone of his name, agitated. "You mustn't be so careless. You know well how you are— should you change in your behavior after our tryst—"

"Don't call it that."

Hannibal eyed him as if he were being tiresome. He continued: "Should you change, Will, your husband will suspect immediately. If he does not already."

Will's stomach chilled. He pushed the remainder of his plate away, losing his appetite. He scratched fervently at the side of his head, ruffling his curls. Tapped his foot against the floor.

"He doesn't," Will said finally. "I told him I'm not seeing you anymore."

"He believes you to be home alone?"

Will shrugged. Crossed his arms. "Not really. I said I'd hang out with Phyllis some. Make friends." Will's eyes flashed over at Hannibal, who watched him intensely. Will ran a hand back through his hair. He could not stop fidgeting. He felt Hannibal's gaze on his every twitch like a spider crawling. Small prickles.

"And have you been to see her?"

"What is this, Twenty Questions? Lay off."

Hannibal said, "You have not been to see her then. Will, what if Frederick asks her about you?"

"He wouldn't go behind my back."

"As he did not go behind your back to confront me. As he thinks you would not go behind his back to come here. Yet he did confront me, and here you are."

"You know what, Hannibal?" Will shoved himself back in the chair, and stood, rocking the table with the suddenness of his movements. He stared down at the man sitting calmly. "I don't need this. I'm leaving."

"Good. And when you leave, go to Phyllis Crawford and spend time with her. You must take some charge of these ill-conceived alibis of yours."

"Fuck you."

Hannibal raised a scant eyebrow. He took stock of Will: green-eyed and wild of hair, his countenance thoroughly incensed. Will could not account for it. He'd been of a sour mood for most of his conscious hours. Sleep last night came at last but only after much force. He figured it was regret.

Yet he found himself here.

Hannibal finally stood from the table. He pushed back the chair gingerly. Rounded the edge of the table to Will's side, and the sun followed him, lighting his eyes. Will backed up step by step, until he came to the wall of the dining room, Hannibal's mass pushing him not unlike any concrete force. Will rubbed the flats of his hands against his jeans. Turned his head to the side away from Hannibal's gaze. The morning sun outside. Will's pulse throbbed between his legs. His breath deepened and slowed as Hannibal leant in. Speaking into Will's ear: "I thought you weren't here to fuck."

Will was grabbed.

When he left the house, it had just turned midday. He went to his house, showered, and placed a new book given to him by Hannibal in the black plastic bag behind the winter clothes. *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. In the bag also sat Hannibal's clothes which he has yet to return. He thinks he might need to move these things to a better location. He does not contemplate them overmuch for what they truly are would seize him with horror: a growing pile of things he must keep from Frederick.

Why am I doing this? he wonders and the door opens. Phyllis greets him.

"I wasn't expecting you – is something wrong, Will?"

"Oh, no." Will looks around, and somewhere a car door slams shut. He tries to smile. "I just– was wondering. If we can hang out."

Phyllis blinks. Then smiles.

*

It is night and Frederick thinks back to his appointment this afternoon. Just before leaving the office, Bedelia looked into Frederick's eyes and said, "You cannot control Will. You cannot control anyone. The only thing you can do, Frederick, is gain understanding of yourself and how you reconcile your feelings with your surroundings. These manifestations on his body are not real. You must understand that, and look to see him for who he truly is. Who he always has been."

When Will walks into the bedroom, his countenance is soft, gentle. Frederick watches him carefully, as he walks about the room, tugging off his shirt, tossing it to the floor. Watches him slide in between the sheets that are fresh with cotton-scented detergent. Will did the washing today. Frederick rubs the fabric of the top sheet between his fingertips. He lies in bed, and faces Will.

The red.

Frederick thinks to himself: *It isn't real. It isn't real. You're hallucinating. And you're hallucinating because you're afraid. Afraid of what he's doing behind your back. But if you take it out of your head–*

But if you take it out of your head–

If you open up, maybe–

Maybe–

Will turns the light off. He is facing Frederick, settling his hands on Frederick's arms. Rubbing lightly against his biceps and pushing his face into the crook of Frederick's neck.

Begins lightly to kiss.

Frederick clears his throat. "Will–" He receives another, firmer kiss against his jaw line. "Will, honey, stop."

Will swallows. Frederick can feel it against his skin. He stops but does not remove himself. Instead, hugs in closer, and simply inhales Frederick, the bed, their joint scent. Will's scalp smells of strawberry shampoo. When did he buy that?

"I have to tell you something," Frederick says. "It's going to sound weird."

Will is quiet. Waiting perhaps.

"I've been having— having hallucinations."

"Mm? What do you mean?" His lips moving at Frederick's throat.

"I mean just that. Hallucinations— about you. On you, I mean." Frederick places his arms around Will. Distantly, it comes upon him that this might be offensive, and so he treads cautiously. "I know we don't much talk about it. I guess maybe it's my fault. I can be sensitive about it— about what happened. With Matthew." The word, God, it still tastes terrible. A putrid sweetness to it. A slimy texture. He swallows it down. "But ever since then, I've been— I've been seeing things on you. Red marks."

"Huh?"

"Red marks," Frederick says, enunciating, thinking: *Oh what are you saying?* "They look like handprints. Just— where I guess I imagined he touched you."

It is silent for a moment. In which, Frederick imagines Will cannot think of what to say. What could he say?

"What I'm saying is: they've been bothering me. It was. It was the reason we didn't have sex for a while. I mean, I was also mad, but every time I wanted to, when I wanted you so badly I thought I couldn't stop myself, those marks stopped me. Then, even after we started having sex again, they didn't go away. I thought I would just have to live with them. But now— but now, Will, there are so many. They've multiplied to the point that you're red all over."

It is silent again. Will is breathing sedately. Frederick runs a fingertip down his husband's soft arm. He thinks he must be dreaming. He cannot really be saying this aloud.

"I love you," Frederick says. "I don't want to mistrust you. And I think that's where these things are coming from. I've been so worried about Hannibal in the past few weeks. I know he's persistent, and even if you're staying away from him... I just. It's the last time I'll ask, okay, Will? Just. Have you really stopped seeing him?"

Will shifts. Further into Frederick's grasp, such that they are lined stomach to stomach and Will wraps his arms around Frederick's waist. Their legs come to intertwine.

"Yes," Will says into his neck. "I've been spending time with Phyllis instead."

His body is so warm. Almost as if the redness along him is heat. Can Frederick convince himself of this? That it is just his body giving off heat. Glowing, because Will is so naturally radiant. Can he live like this?

It will subside, he tells himself. Give it time. Believe him, and it will subside.

The mind works this way, yes, and so too does magic. For no spell has ever been potent with a lack of believing eyes looking on. In books of childhood, Frederick remembers this being a constant. To make it real, one must believe. Ah, thaumaturges and wizards, witches and magicians, they lack all power if the audience turns a skeptical eye. Just believe hard enough. And all miracles will come forth. Everything golden. Everything that glows.

Frederick shuts his eyes tight. So tight it hurts. And when he opens them, they readjust to the darkness. And Will is still red beside him.

Give it time, he tells himself, to quell panic. Give it time.

Will murmurs, "You can ask her if you don't believe me."

"I believe you, Will," Frederick says quickly. He hugs Will, burying his face into the copse of dark curls. "I believe you. I believe you."

*

An indigo dawn. The barest traces of light from between basswood blinds. Curtains drawn haphazardly against them. Will is awake, touching consciousness as if it were through a sheet. He peers up to where Frederick sleeps on his back, his face calm and peaceful.

Will swallows. Inhales. The scent of them both, and their bedclothes, and their home. Touches Frederick's warm arm, where Will has been clenched all night. In the dark, he almost confessed. Almost. The words were on his tongue. For what else could he think to do when confronted with such horror? That his actions have long caused turmoil in his husband, such that he sees visions upon Will. Fiery red? Who could conceive of such a thing? Who could live like that?

Will watches Frederick's eyelids. They flutter in dream. Will wonders – if he begins to believe, will the marks go away? Can Will wash himself of these augers by telling the truth?

Can he wash himself by telling lies? Lies so good he would have to believe?

Will imagines: Frederick finding out. Will sitting him down in the morning sun after a breakfast to the best of his abilities. Then saying, simply, and clearly, that he did not stop seeing Hannibal. Indeed not, he went to Hannibal that very day and donned his wife's finest jewelry. Allowed Hannibal to open the treasure chest he has coveted and he took and he took and he took until he was scraping the bottom of the box. Fingernails grinding against wood. And Will delivered himself yet again yesterday and allowed the very same thing.

Will imagines: Frederick's eyes. How they were that day when he pulled from Will the truth about Matthew Brown. How deep they were, how endlessly green, an enchanted wood where tired deer lie. Dying deer. Their carcasses disintegrating into the grasses, being picked at by crows. Ants. And then the bones turn to dust. And even the dust is gone.

He cannot. He will not. He *will not allow it*.

He can lie. He can lie like he never has, like his life depends on it, like his marriage depends on it, and it does, he knows it does. Will rises from the sheets and leaves Frederick's arm, and slowly does he lift the hem of Frederick's cotton shirt. During this, he gently straddles Frederick's waist. Watches the man's face undisturbed as the shirt settles against his lightly haired chest. Will pulls his own shirt forward and over his head. Tosses it to the floor. Angles himself to remove his boxers and it is only when he is sliding Frederick's boxers down does the man begin to stir. Will nearly smiles. He has always been a rock-heavy sleeper.

"Will," he murmurs, touching consciousness through a woolen blanket. His eyes barely open. Will hums acknowledgement and grabs their lubricant from the nightstand. Warms it in his hand and coats Frederick, simultaneously coaxing him further until he is heated and hard in Will's slippery grip. Frederick's eyes are open now, and he looks up at Will in wonder.

"Will," he says again.

Will smiles. Places his slickened fingers inside himself, one then two, and with the third he feels a stinging sensation. From Hannibal. He continues through it, does not allow the pain to show across his face.

"Hey," Will says, gripping Frederick again.

Frederick exhales, shudders. Places his hands to Will's thighs that are cool with the air conditioning. Will repositions himself, lines them up.

"Am I still red?" he asks, the words barely there. Hanging above them like notes of music. He begins to slide Frederick in, lowering himself.

Frederick looks to be embarrassed. His eyes not meeting Will's.

"It's okay," Will says, toes curling not completely in pleasure as Frederick comes to rest secure inside him. The pain an unwelcome intruder in the room, one only Will can see. But he can feel his husband tremble, lurch just a bit, and that is pleasure enough. "It's okay—if I am. You can say."

Frederick nods slightly.

"Say," Will says.

"Yes, Will. Yes."

Will begins to move. Slowly at first, and the pain is real and striking but Will is going to work through it because he must. And if it hurts him, well—

It is no more than you deserve.

Yes.

"Am I still beautiful?" Will asks. He rolls his hips, in this particular motion which is shadow-gleaned from Hannibal's flow. The way he has a slight undulation at the top of every thrust. Will mimics what it would be like from the receiving end and Frederick gasps with it, clutching tighter to Will. He seems to have forgotten Will's inquiry, and so Will repeats himself again, this time unable to help his tightening up at the heated sear.

"Yes," Frederick gasps. "Yes, you're gor– gorgeous. Will."

Will shivers to hear it. Wets his lips, allows his hands to roam over the landscape of Frederick's stomach, chest, until he is leaned over and gripping the man's shoulders. Frederick's legs are twitching under him. Hands moving, clutching for purchase at Will's hips. Shoving up as Will is angling down and Will is crying out now, little sighs and moans of his husband's name which come with a slanted accent, as if he is really speaking another language. And would this language be translated, *Ricky* might actually mean *I'm sorry*.

*

He had to know this was coming.

Frederick has just kissed Will goodbye. They had raspberry jam on their tongues, and Frederick watched him for a long moment upon their parting, to see if he was still red. He was. They wished each other a good day, and at closing the door, Frederick is now met with the sight of Jack Crawford jogging up from across the road. Frederick cannot help the sigh that comes from him and he flinches slightly, trying to turn his face away. The eye is healing, only a light purple now, but still highly noticeable. At turning, he sees the Audi from next door slide down the road, pause at the stop sign, and leave Sol Terrace.

Jack meets him at the driveway, dressed in uniform for work. He looks handsome, stately, protective. Frederick shrinks from him nonetheless.

"Hey there, Frederick," he says. "How's everything?"

I'm delusional and my husband looks like a Lovecraftian demon. "Wonderful. And with you?"

"Great. Hey, so I just, uh." He pauses here, and looks up, over Frederick's head. Frederick does not need to turn to see him take in the sight of Hannibal's house. "I just wanted to, you know."

Frederick withholds another sigh. "No, Jack, I'm afraid I don't."

"Far be it from me to intrude, but."

"Right."

Jack looks sheepish and motions to Frederick's eye. "Do I need to– have a talk with Hannibal?"

"Jesus, no." Frederick waves a bit, attempts to smile. "God, of course not. We just had a neighborly disagreement is all. It's really nothing to get concerned about. Everything's fine

now."

"Ah. That so?"

"It is."

"Well, I'm really glad. You know. Neighbors fight." Jack pauses again, shrugs in the general direction of the cul-de-sac's bottom. "I can't tell you how many times me and Kade have gotten into it. She's working my last nerve with this mail thing as it is."

Frederick nods, though he is barely listening. He begins to move past Jack's sturdy form to the Escalade. "I know what you mean," he says, offering an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Jack, I really must be going. Thank you for checking on everything."

"Oh, sorry— sure thing."

Frederick touches the driver's side door. He pauses here, and takes one foot to turn in Jack's direction.

You can ask her if you don't believe me.

Frederick isn't sure he wants to open that door. To ask Jack would seem as if he is checking up on Will. Jack already knows far too much as it is. Frederick resists the temptation and opens the door. Before he moves inside, Jack says from over his shoulder, "Oh, and Phyllis said she loves spending time with Will. She, uh, what'd she call him — cute, that's right. She said he's cute."

Frederick feels something strange in his heart — it ripples outwards to every extremity. He looks back over his shoulder to Jack. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, he is cute."

Jack laughs, smiles.

*

The heat intensifies. It washes over Baltimore in a shimmer of sun and dryness, and the leaves of the hollies seem less lush, and the cicadas even whine in protest. A stray cat that has of late taken residence in Sol Terrace often finds comfort under the oak of Beverly's yard. It is orange and white, and it catches crickets in its claws. Will watches it sometimes from his house in the morning, as he clears breakfast dishes. He has moved to a new routine in the following days that manifests in him moving from house to house.

Just after breakfast, he makes the small trek to his leftmost neighbor's house. He has taken to using their back patio doors, thinking there to be less of a chance of being seen by the neighborhood at large. Hannibal leaves the door unlocked. Will comes into the cool of his house, chucking *The Hours* down on any available surface in the halls as he moves through the house. The scent of coffee permeating the lower floor. And brioche French toast is cooling, or cinnamon rolls dripping with orange icing. Hannibal sucking the icing from the pad of a rough thumb.

Will spends the morning here. Sometimes it toes the line of afternoon.

He showers quickly at home, washing Hannibal's scent and semen away, and meanwhile starts laundry or cleaning, and thinking all the while of what he can make for dinner. He looks into the steamed mirror at his skin, and tries to see what Frederick sees. But he cannot.

Across the street, leaving his side of sex and saturation behind. To the soft light of the Crawfords' house where Will must wear a smile, and try not to wince as he sits. Tries not to flutter his eyelashes as he drifts backwards in remembrance of the morning, with Hannibal's left hand in Will's hair, right hand gripping Will's wet hip, bending him like a bow.

Phyllis is kind and opens her house to Will. It is twin to Will's own in layout, as are all of the Sol Terrace homes, but the colors are softer, and like Hannibal's and Kade's homes, there is little discrepancy in decor. The living room is plush with white and light blue, and Will leans into the decorative cushions as he listens to Phyllis speak on when she was young and how she and Jack came to meet. Will tries to look interested. If he is to be here for sections of his days, he must glean something from it. But more often than not, he finds himself nodding off.

"So do you—" Phyllis pauses, smiles, as Will jerks to full awareness. "Do you think you're getting along all right here?"

"Oh. Oh, sure. Yeah, it's great."

She crosses one leg over the other in the armchair. She wears a white skirt, and the fabric lifts enough to see brown skin, unmarred. "Do you still spend time with Hannibal?"

Will looks off. "Nope."

"Well, I know you two were friends."

Will swallows, and finally nods. "Were."

The word hangs in the air. Will feels perhaps he has let things become awkward, but a knock at the door saves him from any ill proceedings. Phyllis sighs as if she knows the knock well, and excuses herself to the foyer. Will blinks and cranes his neck back. He hears a familiar female voice and waits until Phyllis comes back into the sunlit room, Beverly in tow, her smile broadening upon seeing Will. She raises a large wicker basket in hand high, and Will can make from it bags upon bags of colored beads and fabric and needles.

"Hey," she cries, "Will's joining us! Awesome! I knew you weren't a loser like Hannibal!"

Phyllis sighs.

Will sighs.

And the day passes into evening and evening passes into morning, with Will becoming more spastic in his movements as each second goes by. Such that he can barely sit

still. Such that he comes to Hannibal's home on Thursday morning and does not allow the man to finish cooking. And Will's stand-offish gaze and folded arms open, in this, in this:

In the morning-drenched bedroom, in the sweat-soaked sheets, Will's voice is hoarse but his screams persist through it. His head is leaning back completely over the side of the bed, exposing the full white column of his throat. Eyes half-lidded and watering as he stares at himself upside-down in the mirror against the wall. His voice echoes in the day, the half-opened curtains that rain sun on his white form. And Hannibal's mass atop him, all moving muscles beneath thick skin, his hair threaded through the fingers of Will's left hand. His right is thrown back over the bedside, wrist against his head, fist clenched tight to print half-moons of nails in his palm.

Hannibal's shoulders pin down Will's legs against his chest and every thrust forward is all-consuming mist that fills the room and warms it just as much as any sun. Will is half in this world, half in the next. And he knows not where he sets foot. Perhaps he does not set foot at all. Perhaps he is lifted from ground of any planet, hovering like a nymph above water.

Hannibal is sucking, light, light enough to not leave marks. He kisses Will's throat as if it were his mouth. Every thrust deep, angled, as if for some purpose. As if he knows what he would like to hear from Will and pulls it from him.

Will crying out: *Please*.

Will screaming: *Godyes*.

Will sobbing: *Fuck*.

And the curl of his stomach, as Will feels that familiar stab in the darkness, that roiling of night that starts deep inside him. He takes his hand from his forehead and strokes himself between their stomachs: it is never in tandem, or anything close. It cannot be. It is random, such is the nature of the universe. Perhaps once or twice, for just a fraction of an instant, they will move in unison, and it is ridiculous chance akin to meeting someone in a crowded ballroom and spinning away before catching their name.

Will comes against himself, crying and groaning. The strain of his body beseeches Hannibal and he succumbs to nature and grips Will close, hands slipping as they roam across Will's body. Presses his mouth to Will's at the height of his orgasm, forcing a kiss like a bite of a peach or cold plum.

The blackness, hot and welcoming, dissipates after only a moment. Will begins to come back to himself, landing from another space and time. He moves lightly at first, and Hannibal stirs atop him. This strange and silent moment where they are entwined and connected still. When Will is coherent enough, he takes it to be as some mating ball he wants to rid himself of. And he nudges Hannibal from beneath, shifting his legs to attempt unfolding himself.

"Move," he grumbles, sounding like sleep. "Move, you're fucking heavy."

Hannibal is breathing in his ear. He makes to move, and almost resettles, and Will nudges him again.

"Hannibal," he says, clearer now.

There is something like a sigh. Hannibal removes himself, quick enough to cause mass discomfort, and as Will hisses, Hannibal looks to smirk, one eyebrow raised. He backs off, reclining into the wealth of pillows at the head of the bed. Will's legs fall from the air to lie flat into the sheets.

Will is staring at himself in the mirror again. His head heated and dizzy. He is always dizzy on the comedown. He thinks, *Is this really me?*

Hannibal is breathing evenly from his space on the bed. Will has barely caught half his breath but already he is moving, limp and tired, towards the edge of the bed. Swinging his legs over and standing like a newborn fawn.

As he moves to grab his clothes from the floor and the ottoman, Hannibal watches him sedately. Will can feel his gaze, as concretely as he feels the man's come leaking out of him, down the curve of his backside and thigh. Hannibal says, at length, "How far have you read?"

Will pulls on his shirt. "Not far. I'm so busy lately, it's crazy."

"Such is the nature of it."

The shirt is inside-out. He pulls it off, then readjusts. "Yeah." He snorts. "You don't seem that busy."

"It's different for me."

Will stands in his red boxers and shirt, rubbing at one eye. "I'm tired."

"You can stay, Will. You are always welcome to do so."

"I can't. I've got to head over to Phyllis' house for—" He pauses and mimics Beverly's trilling cadence: "*Beadtime*." His jeans pull on next, and he rounds the bottom of the bed, zipping them up.

Hannibal's gaze follows. Will can feel its tendrils in his hair, along his arms. "It's good to spend time with friends. You need them."

Will pauses at this, and buttons his jeans. He does not turn to Hannibal, but feels a sense of ire deep in his gut, as stabbing and undulating as Hannibal is when he is inside. He cannot keep the disgust from his voice: "*You* were supposed to be my friend."

The bed sheets crinkle and shift. Hannibal says, "You cannot have male friends, Will. You know this as well as I do."

Will leaves the room, and the house.

Chapter End Notes

Nice. Real nice, Hannibal.

Husbands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Friday afternoon finds Will wiping pastry cream from the corner of his mouth. It is something from a local bakery; good, but paling in comparison to the pecan rolls he had at Hannibal's home this morning. Beverly brought them to Phyllis' home, along with her bead basket and a case of wine in aluminum cans which she found at the store. They sit in a semi-circle in the living room, Phyllis in the armchair and Will and Beverly on the couch. Will has acquired two band-aids on his fingertips – left pointer finger and right pinky, for his carelessness with the needles. Or perhaps he has no skill for delicate things.

The room is sun-warm and Will struggles with his lace of red beads. Red is Frederick's favorite color. He thinks he might give this to him if he can get it to look less like a knot from the garbage and more like a bracelet. A necklace. An anklet?

"–and anyway," Beverly is saying, crushing her second empty wine can against her forehead, "Kade makes a big deal out of it, but it's only because she wants to get Jack hopped up enough to find the guy. She doesn't care if some kid saw my tits or not – it's all about her stupid junk mail."

Phyllis searches through a Ziploc bag between her and the armrest of the chair. Rummages through smaller sacks of beads and thread. "I'm sure. It'll calm down though– she's back on her tirade about your tree."

"Well, I'm not cutting it down."

"I don't see what the fuss is," Phyllis sighs. "There are other trees, Beverly."

"But it's special. God knows this place could use a little character. Everything's so *Stepford Wives*. Besides, just think of the birds. And that nice cat that moved into the neighborhood."

Phyllis raises an eyebrow but does not deign to comment.

Beverly snorts and nudges at Will, causing him to nearly needle his thumb again. "So hey, why'd Hannibal sock Frederick?"

Will blanches, dropping the needle.

Phyllis cries out, "Beverly!"

"What? Can't we know? Do you know already, Phyl?"

Phyllis exhales a huge gust of air. She looks to Will as he tries to find his way back around his half-necklace. "Will, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Will glances at her, then Beverly. He tenses his eyebrows. That they knew, that perhaps everyone knows, sets him to unease. How can he hope to keep secrets in a place like this? Where everyone is watching? Will thinks of himself in Hannibal's mirror. His curls bouncing, like his leg over Hannibal's shoulder. He shrugs the image away and says, "It's no big deal. Men fight."

Beverly brightens. "Was it over you? I bet it was!" She raises a finger in between them, her eyes impossibly wide. "It's no surprise he made a play for you; he always goes for the pretty ones. Doll eyes, dark hair, sort of ditzy, that's his type."

"You could be describing yourself, you know," Phyllis says.

"Ah, me? No way." She shakes her head, the feathery tails of her hair wafting under Will's nose.

Will looks at the beads in his hands. "So— you wouldn't? If he asked?"

Beverly looks at Will for a moment, a strange redness coming to her cheeks. "Well. Well, no."

Phyllis snorts. She beads quickly. "Beverly, don't start."

"I mean, I wouldn't for real, but you *know*. He *is* extremely hot."

"He's all right," says Phyllis.

"Oh, come on, he's like—" Beverly pauses and raises her hands aloft. Both Will and Phyllis look up to see her beholding naught but air. "Super gorgeous." She pauses, reaching over the coffee table for another can of wine. "But I'm no fool, that kind of thing gets complicated. I've got too much on my plate as it is with my own husband, I don't need to add a lover into the mix."

"Hmm." Phyllis shakes her half-empty can.

"What about you, Will? You think he's good-looking?"

This morning, as finches called into the sun, Hannibal instructed Will to undress him, piece by piece. The buttons of his dress shirt, taking the fabric down muscled arms. Untying his belt, and slowly shucking the grey trousers down over the heated ridge in his boxers. Will was leaking, already succumbing to the waves of darkness hailed by their bare bodies. Hannibal's eyes like blackcurrants and wine. His mouth at Will's pulse.

Will takes a sip of his can. "He's all right."

"*All right*," Beverly cries. "I don't know what's up with you two. You need your eyes checked or something. I'll tell you one thing, though, Bedelia did really well for herself. Imagine getting a piece of that every night! God, I'd be just as glassy-eyed as she is. Not a care in the world."

"Does faith have anything to do with this?"

"Faith?"

"Yes, faith. These delusions I keep having— these markings I see on Will, they're directly tied to my view of him, right? My subconscious view of him. In my subconscious, I am constantly turning back and forwards, in a circle, unsure of whether I can trust Will despite him giving me his word. And since I constantly see the marks, my subconscious must be informing my conscious, otherwise these would be but dreams and not waking nightmares. Then, by that logic, something deep in me cannot put faith in Will, because I still must feel betrayed by the affair with the man in Boston. But relationships— *marriage*, is built on faith, on trust, and so no matter the cost or hardship, I have to find a way to trust him again."

"I would advise against self-diagnosis. That is what you're *here* for."

"I can't help it. I see you, yes, but I am alone with my thoughts constantly. It would be impossible for me to not think about it, to try to help myself."

"You're alone with yourself too often."

"Yes. And no. I told Will."

"Told him?"

"About the marks. I told him what I see on him— have seen, and how they now have changed."

"And what did he say?"

"He asked me if he was still beautiful."

"And he is, of course."

"Of course."

"The concern doesn't surprise me."

"Bedelia."

"My apologies."

"I've been trying to keep this relationship professional, Bedelia, but now I cannot help but to ask. It's for me. For my therapy. I've got to know. Has Hannibal been seeing Will during the day?"

"How would I know if he was?"

"He might tell you."

"Hannibal does not tell me those things. As you mentioned, Will has been visiting with Phyllis Crawford."

"You know as well as I do that those visits cannot take all day. Can you imagine it? Though they used to be inseparable, visiting and reading daily as if it was the most natural thing in the world. And then one day, Will says he will stop. Just like that. His friend. Can he give up his friend just like that?"

"His friend hit you, Frederick."

"Yes, well. Almost gone now, isn't it? You wouldn't really know to look at me."

"You're saying that doesn't matter to Will."

"I'm not saying that. No, no, I'm not saying that. It's just. You said it yourself— his persistence. And Will is. Will is."

"Weak."

"Impressionable."

"I cannot know if they are continuing to see each other."

"And if you did know— if you did know, would you tell me?"

"If it were conducive to your healing."

"You don't deem it so."

"I've not yet decided."

"Is it imprudent to speak of your husband? If I speak of him? You said this place is separate from our home lives, but."

"I also said you may be as open as you like here."

"And you."

"This isn't about me, Frederick. This is about you, and Will—"

"Yes, yes, me and Will, and also Hannibal and *you*, Bedelia. Hannibal and *you*; you are our neighbors and we live in Sol Terrace and these facts follow us like shadows in the day. We cannot escape them."

"What is it you'd like to know about me?"

"How can you tolerate it? How can you do it, Bedelia? Hannibal is a monster."

"If I am not to speak ill of your husband, you are not to speak it of mine."

"Fine. Yes, you're right. Of course. Still. Still, tell me how you can bear what he does. I was told— I was told about the women who lived in our house before us. And why they left."

"Neighborhood gossip."

"Nothing more?"

"I did not say that."

"And there were more before her, weren't there? Many more."

"All very beautiful. All loving of attention."

"*His* attention."

"He does have a way about him."

"Is that why you married him, Bedelia? His way?"

"Is it not the same for you and Will?"

"First of all, no, and second of all, we're not talking about Will right now."

"Frederick, this is ill-advised."

"I don't want advising right now. Does he *smell* like them, Bedelia? Does he fill your bed with their scents? And do you *lay* in it?"

"Frederick."

"And does he look at you like he looks at them? Like he looked at Will?"

"You're becoming irate, Frederick."

"Yes, yes, I am. I am *angry*, Bedelia. Because it makes no sense that you would undergo this— Will *cheated* on me, Bedelia, he had sex with another man in the backseat of his car behind a fucking Starbucks like a two-dollar whore, and I forgave him. I forgave him, and I said I would try and put it behind me and now the onus is on me to do it, because I *said* I would. But that doesn't make it easy. It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do, Bedelia, put faith in someone who said he loved me and then fucked another man— and he said it didn't mean anything. How is that better? You hear people say that. It didn't mean anything, like that makes it lighthearted. So somehow my feelings meant less than a quick fuck. Less than nothing. And, wow, that was just once. All this turmoil and my mind going to sludge over *one* indiscretion, so I want to know, Bedelia: how do you do it? How can you do it? Please tell me. I'd do anything to know how you get over it time and time again because I can't get over it *once*. Not even *once*, Christ."

It is silent in the office. A litany of small white noises creep in: soft music from the waiting room just barely audible through the hard walnut door; blares of cars from the lunch-hour streets below; a few miles from Baltimore-Washington International, high in the blue

ceiling of sky streaks a FedEx plane, leaving a faint trail of white exhaust and an even fainter noise; Frederick sobbing into his hands; Bedelia's shift of legs on the cool leather seat. A moment passes, and Frederick quiets and tears drip through parted fingers like runoff from a small river.

He hears her, her soft voice: "Okay, Frederick. Okay." She pauses. "Suppose..."

*

The weekend comes, and it is at once a blessing and a damnation. Will can hardly tell the difference. Saturday morning fills the sky and Frederick lingers in bed, at Will's side. He is warm, soft, the stubble of his chin rubbing against the back of Will's neck. His arm thrown lazily over Will's side, their bodies dipped into each other under the sheer white sheet, sharing dreams and dream-talk. In this moment, just before Will fully opens his eyes, he knows peace. It is the most at rest he has felt all week.

It is not like the haze. The haze which he experiences with Hannibal; for in that is no peace. That is a buzzing dark high, like a hive of honeybees and he drips honey and Hannibal drools honey into his mouth and he is sticky in the sex-warmed bedroom next door. That is nothingness and headiness, the fervent need between his legs.

This is home.

Will knows this. What Will does not know is if he can stand the long weekend without the haze. His eyelids twitch. He rubs a hand over Frederick's lightly haired forearm. He thinks he will be able to. It has been a full three months since last he experienced anything like it, with Matthew Brown. Yet, back then, he did not see the means to continue taking it. Bit by bit. Pacing. A routine. Secreted in little cracks of his weekdays. Like notes to a friend, stuffed in lockers.

Frederick shifts behind him. Pulls Will in the smallest bit closer, and inhales deep.

A finch calls outside their window. And Will murmurs to Frederick that he is making something for him. With the help of Phyllis and Beverly.

Frederick might not be fully awake. He might say what. He might just mumble.

Will laces their fingers. He says it's a bracelet. Or an anklet. Or a necklace.

*

In the den of Kade's sunset-strewn living room, Beverly's voice is taking on the slight edge of shrillness. She has set down her fluted champagne glass, lacking a coaster, and though this seems to draw Kade's attention foremost, she soon, as the rest of them, gazes up to listen to Beverly intently.

"I *like* my tree, and I'm not cutting it down just so my lawn can look like everyone else's! I don't want it to be the exact same – we went over this last year after you had Y and L hack down my chrysanthemum bushes! Why doesn't my opinion matter on my own yard?"

"I'm not saying it doesn't—" Kade placates, spreading her hands out. "And by the way, you know those chrysanthemums were an allergy hazard for Brian."

"She's right," says Brian.

"Shut up!" Beverly cuts a glance over at him. "I don't care about your runny nose! And is this good cause to cut down an oak tree? Is someone here going to sneeze themselves into a coma over it? Raise your hand, if so. Come on, get 'em up. Anyone? No? I didn't think so."

Kade sullen at this, perhaps thinking herself to be the only one qualified to ask for raised hands. She refocuses: "Your husband doesn't seem to take issue."

"He's never here!"

"Has he said anything to you about this?"

"It doesn't matter what he said or didn't say, I live there too!"

Kade sighs, and looks over at Beverly's reddening face in a way that Will recognizes. As if she were dealing with a petulant child. That very same expression crossed Hannibal's face upon their first meeting. And Will remembers then that though they are in similar position: he, and Hannibal and Beverly and Phyllis and Freddie, and all others who spend their days taking care of the home, Hannibal is quite unlike the rest. He has had a lucrative job prior. Yet he has placed himself in rank with Will and the others.

Why has he done this thing? Will wonders with dull horror, watching as Beverly stands ground in a losing battle. *Why would he place himself in such a submissive position?*

"Let's put it to a vote," Kade says, evening out her voice, as if this might provide Beverly with small comfort. "It is a neighborhood-wide issue, and we've been at it since spring, so let's get it done with already."

Beverly cries, "Hey—"

"Everyone in favor of cutting down the tree, raise your hands." Kade clears her throat, and raises her hand aloft.

Following, more hands rise hesitantly into the air. Some loll on diffidence, some stand straight and high. Phyllis looks uneasy but has raised her hand to match Jack's. Brian and Jimmy have raised theirs, though they both look elsewhere. Freddie is eyeing her phone with one hand, the other up above her head. Hannibal and Bedelia are missing again, though Will knew this would be: Hannibal has agreed not to approach him or Frederick in public. Will is unsure whether he should raise his hand or not. He moves it against his jeans, but ultimately keeps it down. Frederick is unmoving.

Kade says, merely for show, "All opposed?"

Frederick's hand is up first, even before Beverly's. She eyes over at him, smiling in a watery way. Will watches his hand, high and sure in the air, and allows his own to join.

"The ayes have it," Kade says. "Beverly, you'll be glad about it later, when your view is so much wider."

Beverly doesn't respond. And the rest of the meeting passes with little interlude. Indeed, it is the fastest the business has been handled since Will began attending. Towards the end, as neighbors rose from seats, some offered limp condolences and encouragements to Beverly, but she turned her head away, arms folded, eyes hard and dim. Will and Frederick walk through the evening thick with perfume, away from Kade's home to their own.

Will looks across the street to see the heavy-hanging oak in the dark, swaying with light breezes.

He says, almost to himself, "It's too bad. It's a nice tree."

Frederick is staring ahead, his mouth fixed in a hard line. "Kade bullies everyone into these things. I don't know where she gets her nerve."

"She *is* president."

"I didn't vote for her."

Will snorts small laughter, and stops walking as they come to stand before their own mailbox. He pulls Frederick to halt with him, and squeezes his hand, which, for a moment, seems to soften the man's pinched features. "It was sweet," Will says, "you raising your hand."

"It's not like it did any good."

Will leans in, sets his mouth to Frederick's, and thinks, *What is inside people that breeds infidelity? It must be some organ. Unneeded, like an appendix, or tonsils. I would rip it out of me if I could.*

When they part, Will watches Frederick's tired smile and offers one of his own. He says, "It did some good."

*

Monday comes too soon. Frederick felt a tearing at himself at the door this morning, something that threatened to rip him into two halves. One half would stay home with Will. The other half would go to work and care for patients and provide and be proper. But Frederick cannot be two people. He knows this as well as anyone. He has gone to the hospital.

The walkways are quiet; just the scuffle of soft-soled shoes against the glossed floors. Key rings jingling on belt hooks. Murmurs and static over the radios and Bailey comes to Frederick's office with coffee which is strange now, overly strange. It doesn't taste right. He sips it, blinks widely, tents his eyebrows. And he calls her back.

The door opens, her frizzed head popping in. "Yes, sir."

"Sorry," he says, raising the cup over his wide desk. "Has something gone wrong with the coffee machine?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Um. Is it bad?"

"Odd, more like."

"I'll try again—" But as she takes a step into the room, Frederick refutes her, insisting it will do and that she should not be troubled. She tries again, to be met with more refutations and Frederick's apologetic smile. She shuts the door, after returning the smile. When he is alone again, he looks into the brown liquid and sees himself reflected back. His eyes murky, brown. He doesn't want to see himself, and to trouble the liquid, he sips again, recoiling visibly this time. It tastes worse than Will's now.

He thinks today is a good day to overcome his fears. Strange sensations this morning at the front door, shivering in the car on the commute even in the ninety degree weather, and now this horrid coffee. If something good is to come from this day, he must make it himself. And he tries not to give in to notions of despair, as it creeps on the edge of his being, swaying delicately with the breeze of his moods. He sets to task:

He speaks to patients in the conference room across the hall. And when it comes time for Abel Gideon, instead of crossing his name off with a tag of unruly behavior as he has come to do these past weeks, he rises from the semi-comfortable chair of the room and goes down into the second floor basement. The door to the long hall is odd, not overly familiar. He has seen this place, not only concretely beneath the hospital, but perhaps elsewhere. Perhaps it has slithered into his dreams. A space where he stood at one end, and hovering at the other, a mercreature in a tank. Only silhouetted by ill lighting behind: fins and spikes standing out on forearms and shoulders. Webbed feet moving gracefully beneath. Water-dancing.

Frederick comes to stand before Abel Gideon, who sits on his cot. He looks even smaller than before. This is the nature of all fearful things, Frederick considers. Never as terrifying in reality. Never measuring up to one's imagination.

Frederick thinks of Will, blindingly red at home, and has to stifle a bit of laughter. His imagination is ceaseless.

"And here I thought you'd forgotten about me."

"I'm sorry, Abel. I truly do apologize for my absence."

Abel's eyes are sunken in, more so than before. But they are crystalline as ever. Glacial waters move in them, and Frederick swears he can see his reflection, though it is small and far away. "Not a problem," he says, reclining against the one flat pillow and wall behind. "Though I can't say I didn't miss you. I don't have much in the way of intelligent conversation."

"The staff tells me you've been receiving letters. Admirers."

"*Intelligent*, Ricky." At this Frederick flinches. It is reactionary, and though Abel seems to notice, he makes no comment for it. He continues: "You left me to my own devices, though I don't blame you. Was terribly rude of me, what all I said last time. No wonder you took off like a bat out of Hell. I'd like to mend our bridges."

"Consider them mended."

"Really? No hard feelings?" He peers through the glass, a shrewd expression crossing his face.

Frederick allows his countenance to be searched. "It would be unprofessional for me to hold anything against you, Abel. I'm here to treat you."

Abel relaxes again, smiling. "And treat me you shall."

"Where should we begin?"

"I have a question to ask you."

Already Frederick's guard is up, though he tries to lower it. He is hyper-aware of the ring on his finger, which glitters dully in the light. Abel has taken stock of it, though said nothing. Frederick considered briefly taking it off; but he wouldn't want Abel to think something ungainly had happened. No, everything is just the same.

"Yes," Frederick says.

Abel tilts his head slightly. "Did you dream about me, Ricky?" He pauses. "I dreamt about you."

"I thought about you, Abel. But I don't remember my dreams."

"Shall I tell you what my dreams were about?"

"If it pleases you."

And tell Frederick he does, though Frederick drifts in and out of it. In the aural periphery, it comes to him as if through a seashell: water dreams, he says, Frederick sleek and nimble as a seal, and speaking to Abel from far away, bubbles floating between them with words like sound bites inside, phrases in Frederick's voice like: *do you?* and Abel would respond: *I do*

Frederick is far away in this. Sinking further and further into himself, and he thinks of Bedelia in the light of midday, seated in the lushness of her leather armchair, speaking to Frederick and saying—

"Suppose there was once a married woman. Newlywed and disastrously in love. This is not a new notion. Suppose, though, further: that this woman's husband was strangely perfect. Courteous and attentive. They never quarreled. And then let us suppose that one day she came to visit her husband at his office across the city. A surprise lunchtime visit. And a patient walked out of the room, smelling so strongly of sex, it could be tasted on her. Her

husband, too. Now, suppose the wife was so enraged, so heartbroken, that she could not find it in her to yell. She cried quietly, and tried to leave. But no, suppose she did not make it to the door again. Suppose she was wrapped in an embrace so strong, so sure, caressed with promises and explanations. Her senses assured her, but he assured more, and a man's assurance, particularly a beloved man's assurance, carries more weight than worldly sense. He was to renounce the affair, and in good faith he too renounced his job. Now—suppose, Frederick, she gave the man another chance. And another. And another. And one must stop and think—how ridiculous. This woman, why, she surely is a fool. Why not leave? Why not go and save herself from further heartache? We must ask this woman, for we deserve a proper answer, otherwise her heartache, as we so judge, is null and void. Reaped by her own silliness. *But, ah, none of them know*, thinks the supposed woman, *none of them know what my husband is like when we are alone. The sweet things he says. The scent of home in his arms. The way he twirls a lock of my hair around his fingers just so.* And so, Frederick, suppose this woman has long since determined to turn a blind eye. Because, in reality, that is a much less burdensome ailment than a bereft heart. So, perhaps you might ask this woman: *but doesn't it still hurt? your heart?* And to that, we can suppose she might reply: *Oh. Oh, yes. But only what is left of it. And only just a bit.*"

"Ricky? Ricky, are you listening?"

Frederick stares ahead, eyes swampy and thick. "Yes, Abel. I most certainly am listening."

*

A heat-and-honey morning. Sun streaming through just-parted curtains to rain down on Hannibal's bed and him bare, sweat-drenched, above Will. Their second round just coming to an end, with the slow removal of Hannibal himself from Will's body. But he hovers just over Will, pinning him to the mattress and haphazard sheets. The room thick with sweat and semen scents. Will tried to leave after the first round, rising to his hands and knees from his stomach, his mind coming back to itself. Laundry, it told him. Dishes, and bills to be sorted. Hannibal grabbed Will by the back of the neck before he quite got to his knees. And he pulled him close, whispering, "I'm not going to let you leave just yet."

Will struggled at first, briefly, before the haze re-descended with startling quickness. Before long, he was moaning in tone like pain, or anger. His stomach clenched, hands slipping in their grip on Hannibal's shoulders. Hannibal's whole body rocketing into him, as if he wanted to desperately be incased, as if he would like nothing more than to wear Will like a second skin. Will screaming so loud he is now sure, in the aftermath, that someone must have heard. Someone jogging by on the sidewalk, or a gardener packing up equipment.

Hannibal looks down on Will. The gaze is felt, and the room still burns with memory of their shared darkness. The sensation not so different from sitting beside Hannibal in a thunderhead, and looking off into the distance, watching cyan strings of lightning. Occasionally reaching back to stroke Hannibal's side or chest.

With its dissipation, Will feels only hot and uncomfortable. He shifts lightly, suggesting to Hannibal that he move. Hannibal is still. A bird calls somewhere in the yard and it reminds Will of Beverly.

He swallows, uses one hand to push the bangs from his eyes. "They're going to cut down Beverly's tree." He tears his gaze from Hannibal's, turns it towards the window. Squints.

"Kade is finally getting her way." Hannibal's gaze beckons Will, but Will does not care for it.

Will shifts again, to no avail. "I hate this place," he says. "It's not fair."

Hannibal leans down. Will feels the man's tongue thick and heavy just under his chin. Will shivers, and imagines his skin bright red.

His voice, small as a child's: "And I hate you."

"Mm." Hannibal continues licking him. Long slow stripes. As he speaks, his voice reverberates in Will's neck: "Is that so?" He tilts Will's head back and sucks lightly at his collarbones. "Well, I'm sorry to tell you this, Will, but what you hate in me is present in yourself as well. It always has been."

"You don't know that."

"You've never seen what this is like, though you have skirted its lines. With Matthew—" He sucks the juncture of Will's jaw. "—it was but once. A continued arrangement with a lover takes a larger toll than one evening in a car."

"I never agreed to this."

Hannibal grips his thigh, then moves it open. "Yet here you are."

"I wanna stop," Will says, voice threatening to break. "I wanna quit." He feels heat at his eyes as he stares at the window. A straining, and the bright light blurs. "I'm killing my husband. And he doesn't even know it."

"Killing someone you love is—"

"Awful," Will gasps, and he blinks, and a rounded tear follows the curve of his cheek. He grits his teeth. "Get up."

"You're awful," Hannibal breathes into his ear. Kisses the lobe lightly. "Then what you also must hate is—"

"Me," Will says. He pushes at Hannibal's shoulders, then relinquishes his hands to wipe at his own weeping eyes. "Yeah. Yeah. I hate myself."

Chapter End Notes

Ouch.

Spat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will pulls on his shorts, and feels a slight ache at his backside. He feels that familiar wetness and the slick drip of come down the curve of his thigh. He neglected boxers this morning. It hardly matters – he is going to take a long shower. A long, long shower. From the open windows in Hannibal's bedroom, he can see the sizzling day and thinks of cold water on his skin. Shuts his eyes tight for a moment. Then opens them.

He stands and turns back to Hannibal on the bed, who has since pulled on red boxers. After the third round.

Will wobbles on unsure footing. Sways, as if he has not known how to walk upright. He has been on hands and knees quite often lately. He says, "What's the point of this?" His voice gentle: glass with hairline fractures. "I-I mean, why? Going on and on like this."

Hannibal leans his head back into the feathered pillows. Chest hair glistening with sweat. "Are you unsatisfied, Will?"

"I'm not talking about physical." Will swallows. Sways again. "It feels good. It feels like—" He searches for the word, the phrase, that would sum it up adequately, and in his failing to do so finds that Hannibal is shaking his head. Will stills again, and knows that it needs no explanation. Not to the one who also sits in the thunderhead. "But when you were with others— I mean, I've never done this, it was a one-time thing with Matthew. And it felt good then too. I didn't know— I didn't know how exhausting it would be." He winces at remembered pain. "I'm tired. I'm so tired."

"What are you asking me, Will?"

"What is the endgame?"

"Endgame," Hannibal says, testing the word, tasting it.

Will steadies himself against the jamb of the bedroom door, for he did not eat much in the way of breakfast this morning. He thinks of the pastries Beverly always brings to the Crawford house and his stomach growls low and sleeping. Will says, "I love my husband. And I'm not going to end my marriage. So I don't know— I don't know what we're doing."

"Have you been reading the book?"

"Hannibal."

"Have you?"

Will sours, his face marred with shadow. *With red*, he thinks. "Some." Shrugs. "What about it?"

Hannibal moves from the middle valley of the bed. He comes to the edge, bare feet upon the floor and walks to Will smoothly though Will flinches away. "Read it," he says, his hazel eyes lightened. Drifting now completely away from the black they are in the midst of sex. "If nothing else, it might provide some distraction. You need it."

Will looks down, aside. "I need to go, Hannibal."

Hannibal nods. And as Will turns quickly to the darkened hall, he hears the accent-laden voice from behind: "Strange. You never call me Superman anymore."

Will shrugs, folds his arms. "Superman is supposed to save lives," he says. "Not wreck them." And he doesn't give Hannibal time to respond. He simply goes downstairs, into the first floor and then the cavernous foyer. The floor colder down here than upstairs. Pulls his shoes on by the door, and sends a glance over his shoulder towards the unicorn, who has of late looked empty-eyed.

The racehorse in the foyer of Will's own home has worn similar expression. Will cannot account for it. In moments just before sleep, when he is caught between sheets of reverie and wakefulness, he imagines the two of them together. The horse and the unicorn, out in a pasture green with spring, just bereft of low frosts. The sun above them, and a beltline of trees behind. And all the world around. Mouths lowered to the grass, cropping shortly. He imagines this in some delirium and wonders what it means. Are horses and unicorns even the same creature? And can they co-exist?

Will steps out into early afternoon. Cicadas whir and buzz on the trees, and the somnolent cat across the street rests in the shade of the oak. When Will turns towards his house, the ravine that divides their properties, he halts and feels his stomach lurch, squelch, the light hair on his arms stand with unease. Beverly lingers at his doorstep, hand raised in fervent knocking, and he has an instant in which he thinks to run back into Hannibal's home but it is fast-passing and Beverly's moon eyes are on him; her open-mouthed smile moving lightly to surprise, and then matches Will's own uneasy expression.

Will feels he has no choice. He slowly approaches her, and she comes away from the door to meet him at the ravine.

"Oh," she says, tone wondering, and miraculously a redness comes to her cheeks. She looks over his head at the looming house in the sun. "Um. Sorry. I just was coming by to get you... it, uh, well, I thought—"

"Beverly, I can explain."

"You, uh, you don't have to, it's whatever—" She pauses, and Will follows her gaze to his left leg where his shorts cut off, and a milky-white line of come trickles down. She speaks quicker and Will's stomach turns inside-out: "It's whatever, just come by, you know, when you want to, or if you're busy that's cool too, I mean—"

"Don't," Will says, the word like a whine. "*Please* don't say anything. *Please*. Beverly, please, God, I'm begging you, it was an accident, I didn't mean it, it was just once, don't say anything, please don't tell anyone—"

"Will, just relax—"

A car rolls down the street, and Will jolts, his eyes wide. It cannot be Frederick, it cannot be. And he turns to see it isn't; it moves towards the Lounds house, its windows tinted. Will's breathing heavies, and he begins to weep. His eyes leaking water as a faucet not yet turned complete. Drip by drip. He holds his hands up and tears fall into the palms.

"Beverly," he says, his voice like a child.

She shakes her head. "Go home, Will, go home. It's all right. I'll tell Phyllis you're not coming over tod—"

"No, no," he cries out then lowers his voice. His hands shake, and he turns quickly to glance up at the windows of Hannibal's house. Does he see? Does he see this happening? "I'll— I'll be over there, just, just give me a few minutes, okay? I'll be there—"

"But Will—"

"I can't," his voice cracks, "I can't *not* come over, I can't, I just can't, so please."

She looks at him. Shoulders lax, and her hair is darker than Will's, darker than night. "Sure," she says. Takes a foot through the grass, towards the street. "We'll be waiting."

Will swallows. Wipes his eyes with the back of his hands. The line of come touches his ankle. Will wishes he could rip his skin off.

"Thanks," he says.

Beverly moves from his path and starts towards the street. Will continues through the grass, upon the sandcrete stepping stones, and pushes his keys into the door. He misses, tries again, the sound of metal scratching against metal. He looks back towards Beverly, her form diminishing, and she stops to pet the cat beneath her tree. It hardly seems to notice her, and allows itself a light rub along the length of its back. Will sobs, once, heatedly, and goes into the house.

*

Bedelia sits across from Frederick in the coolness of the office. Nearly frigid. He can see, in the sun, the goosebumps along one white shin that she bounces over the other. Her dress is ocean blue, and she touches lightly the hem, saying, "Did you feel accomplished? Finally overcoming your fears?"

Frederick watches the gold bangle at her wrist. "I know I said I was afraid, but— but it wasn't so bad. It was the part beforehand that was terrible. Like before jumping off a diving board. The heaviness in your chest."

"I've never done it."

Frederick shakes his head. "Of course not."

"Then, you no longer fear seeing to Abel Gideon?"

"No," Frederick says. "He still attempts to antagonize me. Lightly, as if he fears me leaving him again. I didn't mean it but as such, I seem to have put some of my own brand of fear into him."

Bedelia blinks slowly. "You are stronger than you think."

Frederick snorts.

"I'm serious."

"I know, Bedelia. But it doesn't make sense to me. I don't feel strong at all. I feel—" Frederick searches for the word, yet it eludes him. He makes a vague motion with his hand, sweeping in the cold air, and looks aside to the windows. The city in fervent motion just below. "And I'm tired. I barely get any rest, because Will is always restless, moving around."

"He's not sleeping well either."

"No." Frederick points quickly to the dark circles beneath his eyes. "We share these."

"Has he spoken to you about it?"

Frederick shakes his head. Shifts. The leather groans. "He thinks I don't know. He thinks I'm asleep because I lay there and just breathe as if I were. While he tangles and shifts around. Then, when he does fall asleep, I can see his face, wincing in bad dreams. I don't know. It looks like bad dreams. He doesn't talk about them."

"Has he ever?"

Snorting laughter again. A raised eyebrow in remembrance. "Oh, yes. Yes, incessantly. I remember him just waking up from naps and telling me these things— ridiculous things he'd dreamt. Like a child, the way his eyes lit up, about dragons and expeditions into coves for treasure." Frederick presses his lips together, taps his fingertips upon his knee. Rhythms in piano keys: F. G. Am. "And he'd complain about never having wet dreams. He said to me once, 'Everyone in high school used to brag about them, but I've never had one, not even once.' The strangest thing to be irate over. And he'd ask me about mine, but I never could remember them, I still can't."

"Did these conversations interest you? His dreams?"

Frederick now looks at her — his expression lighthearted and slightly shrewd. "Hearing other people's dreams isn't exactly my idea of an exciting morning. They're random, they make no sense, they don't foretell anything." Drumming fingertips faster. "But the look on his face. It's so lovely. Like he can see again everything he dreamt about, as if they were real. He really did go exploring for treasure. He met a pirate and stole the man's parrot. What was Will going to do with the parrot? I've no idea. Neither does he. But I'd listen— I'd listen for an eternity. Just to see that dreamy look on his face." He swallows and all at once, the fingertips slow to a stop.

In the waiting room, someone can be heard crying. The high-pitched sobs hint at a woman.

Bedelia uncrosses her legs, then re-crosses them in the opposite direction. She takes a moment, and her lips move slightly. She says, "If you're wondering if Will has told Hannibal about his dreams, I cannot know that, Frederick."

"I know."

"Though I can say that whether he has or not is irrelevant. Private emotions, when revealed to a second party, are not dependent on how or from whom they are given."

Frederick looks at her.

She says, "They are dependent on how they are received."

Frederick is trying to parse this. But he feels a slight headache forming at his left temple and finds this difficult. He squints, smiles, tries to shake his head.

She leans forward slightly, hands clasped in the satin fabric upon her lap. The sun deepens her gaze. "I don't believe he could care like you do."

*

A purple eventide coats the sky, and Will stands in his kitchen. His bare feet cool along the tile, curls caught pinkened by the light through the vista window beyond the sink. His hands down in the basin, wrists coated in suds. He washes the nicest plates they currently own – a set of leaf green melamine dinner plates, still coated in a light film of dust from the box. In the oven, and permeating the room with a robust scent of tomato and basil, is a lasagna that sits settled in a cast-iron skillet. He read online that it cooks faster this way. Will swallows. He scrubs at a spot on the plate. There is a small protruding nubbin – remnants from the kiln? He cannot tell. He scrubs at it harder.

The set cost nearly a hundred dollars. It should have no imperfections.

He takes a stainless steel scouring pad, setting aside the purple sponge leaking soap. The hot water runs over his fingers, and they redden. He spent his time with Beverly and Phyllis today in something that might resemble shock. He took beer from Phyllis' smooth brown hand, and allowed Beverly to help him secure fastens to his strange and ill-beaded project. Yet in every glance there was something not so unlike that which passes betwixt he and Hannibal – in shared outer spaces. At the mailbox, or walking along the sidewalk to go to Neighborhood Association meetings. A silent, unspoken thing. Tangible, ethereal. Will wonders how many people in Sol Terrace share this feeling: silent horrors that shall not be spoken of aloud.

How do secrets walk in sunlit days? How do they enter living rooms warm with idle chat and sit beside you on the couch? How do they look at you? Can they look at you? And when they do, is it with understanding eyes? Or judgment?

I understand why you have done this terrible thing.

That rumbling, smoke-hazed voice that dwells inside Will, urging him to debase himself, he would never say that. Understanding, a kind heart, a reassuring gesture. Affirmation. None of that is part of the thunderhead. And it never has been.

Will remembers: *Matthew Brown*, he thinks, holding the soap-slippery plate with his left hand and boring down to scour it with the right. *My herald*. To think back to that night in the red Honda is almost unreal. As if it hadn't happened to him. Was Will quite a different man before that night? And was he quite different after?

But I have always been me, he thinks, and with that thought escapes from him a bubble of a whimper. Clear and small as the suds at his wrist. *I haven't been anyone else*.

When he left the Crawford house this afternoon, he watched as Beverly moved sideways across to her own home. He longed to go after her, to explain. But he felt that would only worsen it and he did not want to hear himself try to justify it – his stomach lurches at the thought, as if he had witnessed it from on high: Beverly standing on his patch of lawn, Will before her in shambles, bags beneath his eyes, chest heaving in the oncoming of tears, and come like an oil slick running down his leg. The horror seeped into Will's heart and has not left. Roils there, moving darkly over and against itself. Not so unlike Will and Hannibal against each other in the barest seconds post-orgasm.

This is all *his* fault.

It is all.

His.

Fault.

The voice, raising its head from the abyss: *Did you not go to him?*

"But it wasn't my– I just–" Will grits his teeth. His muscles work, in his biceps and forearms and hands, such that they begin to cramp. "I didn't mean–"

It shatters; the plate breaks in his hand, the clattering sound it makes against the basin and faucet a raucous din that covers almost the front door opening. Frederick's familiar footsteps on the marbled floor. Will is gasping, taking a step back from the sink as the water runs ever onward. A creek, a river. Washing suds and blood down the drain.

"Will? Will, are you okay?"

Will turns around, is met with Frederick walking forward with a worry in each step. Will's eyes shimmering and wide on his husband's downturned gaze, his expression lined with shock as he takes Will's hands gently in his own. The two gaping wounds on each palm, bleeding freely.

"What happened? Come on, let's wash this out." He moves back, removes his suit jacket and tosses it to the granite island. "I'll get the peroxide, just sit down."

Near the stove range, an owl-shaped egg timer begins to ring, and Will looks to it with such urgency it might be an infant crying.

Frederick grabs his wrist. "Will, that can wait—"

"No, really," Will says, and there is panic in his voice. His eyes wide on Frederick. "I need to get it or it'll burn. I think you might like this. I think I did a good job."

Frederick's countenance changes. From concern to confusion, then to settle silently into sorrow. The bags under his eyes are fervent, like Will's own.

We look alike, Will thinks, buzzing with pain. Frederick coaxes him to sit though Will is only barely aware of it. He sits on a stool while Frederick dons the apple-covered oven mitts and takes the cast-iron skillet from the oven. He sets it on a cutting board to cool, and the scent intensifies around them, and as Frederick quietly cleans and tends to Will's wounds, Will can only look at Frederick slowly dabbing up the blood.

"I wish," Will says softly, "the red could be wiped away this easy."

Frederick wraps white bandages around Will's left palm. A slow, steady motion, and ties it tightly with a small knot. "Me too," he says.

*

It is full dark out and Frederick has been watching Will carefully. Upon arriving home, he was confronted with a mix of senses: the sound of running water, the scent of heavy thick sauce and garlic, the sight of Will bleeding, his eyes half-empty. Frederick has not let his husband near out of sight since. Over dinner, Frederick praised him endlessly. He was right. Frederick liked the lasagna, no, more than that, it was truly delicious. He searched in his mind, merely for curiosity's sake. Felt the food on his tongue, go down his throat. Closed his eyes upon the swallow. He could not find any fault.

When his plate was cleared, just streaks of red beneath the fork and butter knife, he said, "You really have learned so much, Will. It's astounding."

Will smiled, looking aside. Demureness in Will is not something often seen and so Frederick took note of it as one would view an exceedingly rare bird.

Or a unicorn, he thought.

Following dinner, Frederick has beseeched Will to rest and sit down. "You've been working all day," he said.

Will sat on the couch in the living room, his skin glowing red in the half-dark. "You have too."

"You're the one hurt."

Will looked down into his hands.

Something is thumping around in Frederick. Knocking upon the inner walls of his skull as if he might be called to answer this knocking. But he shuns it, pretends he isn't home. He is reading patient files on the couch in lamp lighting, Will falling asleep with his head in Frederick's lap. His eyes, green and ethereal, are half open as he drifts in and out of sleep. Frederick watches from beneath the shuffled papers. The bandages on his hands, which are curled into half-fists like a sleeping child. Frederick is tempted to ask about his dreams.

In the background, there is the soft whistle and pop of fireworks. The Fourth of July has come and gone, and these fireworks originate behind Sol, from the soft valley of Luna. Kade Prurnell has forbade fireworks in the neighborhood. "A fire hazard," she's said. "And they're annoying."

Another noise joins the off-and-on of explosions and Will shifts lightly in Frederick's lap. Frederick lowers his papers a bit and looks off through the front window, which opens the view to the street and the houses on the other side. The Y and L Landscaping truck sits out in the street, its Papyrus font illumined by lamppost lighting. There follows the whirl of a saw, and Frederick settles again, realizing what is happening outside. The truck obscures the view of Beverly's house and the oak's leaves rustle against an ebon sky.

"The tree," Will says, his voice small. Speaking into his hands.

Frederick places a hand into his curls. Rubs lightly his fervent red scalp.

Will blinks slowly. It is a strange reminder of Bedelia. "We shouldn't have let her do it," he murmurs. "Kade. We shouldn't have let her get away with it."

"There wasn't really much we could do, Will."

"I know."

"I do feel terribly for her."

Will shifts lightly, and turns his head to rub against Frederick's thigh. "You wouldn't let her tear down my tree if I had one."

"No," Frederick says, almost laughing. "Certainly not."

"I know."

Frederick almost doesn't say it, but cannot stop himself: "I'd get another black eye for your tree, Will."

"I know." A watery voice.

"Will? Are you okay?"

He is nodding. Frederick sets the papers down on the coffee table. He pushes a few thick curls from Will's eyes and finds his face red, though he is attempting to hide it in the fabric of Frederick's slacks. Takes his bandaged hands inwards. Frederick is speaking softly

to him, in a tone of comfort. He is trying desperately, tiredly to keep the confusion from his voice.

There is that knocking again on the inside of his skull.

Frederick turns from the door, for Will, for Will.

"Will, I can't help if I don't know what's wrong. You've got to talk to me, please."

Babbling. Pure babbling, and something else, like cooing. "Sorry, Ricky," he can make out, "sorry. I just— I just—"

"Will, relax." A hand on his upper back. Slow, large circles against the cotton shirt.

"It's so unfair," he's crying, "it's not fair. Why'd we let her do it? It's not fair. I hate this place, Ricky. I hate it, I can't stand it. I know we just got here but I can't stand the Neighborhood Association and Kade and our neighbors. I'm unhappy. I'm so unhappy."

Frederick watches Will, his scrunched red face, the white of his teeth flashing as he grits down and tears begin to form and fall. Will tugging at Frederick's shirt, and burying his face there. Wetting it. The saw in the background, a zealot noise, that which is white and fuzz like the airplanes near Bedelia's office, those which sometimes blot out her speaking to him. Her lips. The knocking on his skull.

Will weeps. "I want to move, Ricky. Let's move. Can we?"

Frederick looks over top his head. Through the window, and he sees the tree fall and the men begin to take it away. Load it onto the truck after it has been hacked more. Desecrated. Through this darkened vista, Frederick sees a few neighbors on their lawns, and peering from double doors of fine stately houses. Staring, all of them, at what they have voted for. And Beverly on her own lawn, near the fresh stump which Kade will probably have dug out at some point. Frederick can hear her now: "It's unsightly." The truck drives away and another firework pops high in the night. This one is blue, startling blue, and it lights up the street and it lights up Beverly's tear-streaked face.

Frederick holds his husband's shuddering shoulders. "Yes," he says, "if you want to."

*

The morning is terribly hot. Will felt it, just from the front door opening, from letting Frederick out into the world after a goodbye kiss. Cicadas even sounded lazy – their buzzings and cryings limp with the heat. Across the street, Will saw the stump which was made last night and in the daytime it looked a thing of terror.

He thought: *All the world will look like this one day. They will cut down all the trees because Kade Prurnell told them to. She will suffocate us all.*

An hour after Frederick has gone now. Will has walked about his house, and looked at his things, and thinks of repacking them soon. Frederick said yes. He said yes to moving.

This is the answer. Will knew it last night: he began to cry and cry, the way he did when he was but a child. When he felt so guilty after committing some small atrocity and feared the worst— getting caught. He would cry from the exhaustion of hiding a lie and bare himself in sorrow. Frederick does not refute or question Will when he is in despair. Will has known this since the rise of their joint kingdom. Since the Golden Age. Like a magician:

And now for my final trick.

But Will is all out of magic, and he cannot stay in this neighborhood. They must go, for what has transpired between Will and Hannibal has seeped through the lock of their seething mating ball and found its way from the runoff to the sea. The wild rushing ocean.

Will takes care to re-wrap his wounds. Matching cuts on each palm. He looks at the white bandages and thinks: *Will the Martyr*. It is almost laughable. From here, he moves into the bedroom closet, moves the boxes of winter clothes to find the black bag he has been saving and hiding. He shoves into it the book Hannibal has chosen, *The Hours*—

(Will has read upwards of fifty pages— little moments stolen in the afternoon, when he wasn't cooking or cleaning or crying. He finds it distasteful and thinks this is some colossal joke that Hannibal is making, and he thinks back to that night that seems so long ago, when they dined in the leftmost house and Hannibal spoke on ennui and relieving it of Will, and is this Hannibal's crude way of telling Will that all those who find themselves working in the home fuck out of boredom or some misplaced search for existential validation? Because it isn't funny and Will doesn't believe half a word of it, not half a word)

—and takes a deep drink in of the mildew scent of the clothing. His stomach sours. He leaves through the back door of the house with the bag clutched tight in his fist and approaches the back door of his neighbor. Tests the handle, finds it open, and comes into the cool of the house.

Immediately the scent of cinnamon and vanilla. Will recognizes the slight hint of orange on the air, and he goes into the kitchen first. There are cinnamon rolls on the island, some of which have been eaten. The sink is wet, recently used. Will peers in through the living room, to find no one there. Up, then. The staircase and the hardwood floor. The long hall at the end of which is the master bedroom. Will stands in the threshold, finding Hannibal in black button-up and grey slacks, laying the top sheet down over the bed. The room smells of detergent.

Hannibal says, without turning, "Will."

Will holds out the bag. "Here's your things. Clothes, and your book. And before you ask, I didn't wash them, and I didn't read the whole thing. I don't want to." He shakes the bag again, to call for Hannibal's attention. But the man stays half-turned away. "I convinced Frederick to move. We're leaving, and until we do I don't want to see you again."

"Oh, is this goodbye?"

"This is goodbye."

Hannibal turns now, and the sun through the parted curtains, the open blinds, touches the curve of his face and his hair is gold. "It's too bad," he says. "You two were fitting in well around here, Will. And you've learned much."

"Take this," Will says. He shakes the bag again.

Hannibal looks at the bag. Then at Will. "Did you cry?"

"What?"

"Did you cry? To convince him to move."

Will shifts his stance. Arm held out in determination. Behind Hannibal, the sheet has settled to the bed. The pillows are on the floor, strewn like rose petals. "What does that matter?"

Hannibal looks as if he knows the answer. "You are yet a child. You don't have to debase yourself in that way. You already have the upper hand."

Swallows. "You'd know all about debasing, wouldn't you?"

Hannibal motions to the bed. "You mean what we've done?"

"What you do. What *you* do, you've done it a thousand times, and I only did it *twice*." Will promised himself he would not let Hannibal bait him in this way, would not allow himself to become ired, but he cannot help it; that look, that damn calm look in his eyes, Will wants to take those eyes like glass and shatter them on the ground. "This is," he gasps, "your fault. You— you're why this happened, you're why I feel like shit. You're why I can't get any sleep, and Frederick looks like a walking zombie. Why he sees red all over me." Will drops the bag to the ground and holds out his hands like claws, the bandages wrapped there. "You're why I'm red all over."

Hannibal looks to consider. His gaze along the wounds. "If you are in this hysteria because of Beverly Katz—"

"She knows—"

"You can control it."

"I don't want to control it! God, fucking— you don't hear me! And you never have! I can't stand you, I can't stand you, I wish I'd never let you fuck me—" He rushes to the side and takes the lamp from the nightstand, pushing it to the ground. It fractures, an octagonal piece of the ceramic flinging outwards. Will bares his teeth towards Hannibal feet away. "You don't care, do you? You just. Don't. Care."

Hannibal exhales, and his expression is familiar. A man dealing with a riotous child.

Will is going to show him *riotous*. He turns quickly again, for the master bathroom. Rushes in, the light standing on, and he runs an arm along the counter, knocking from it colognes and perfumes, the golden hairdryer and soaps. Hannibal's footsteps are behind him.

Will turns, and grabs the red lacquered jewelry box as he does so. He holds it to his stomach with trembling hands.

"You can control him, Will." Hannibal stands within the bathroom, a few feet away. His countenance relaxed. Will wonders how many times he has done this. And who does he see standing here? Does Will blur like a mirage, a layered image like the point of an axis upon which many stand, have stood, and will continue to stand? "You have it in you, if you dare to look for it."

Will's voice is soft: "Is that what you do? You control Bedelia?"

"You have seen it. How they look pushed to the edge. How your beauty brings them back to you; as if they were on a string. You cannot say you have not marveled at your own strength in this area. You cannot say that, Will."

Will slams the box to the ground. The back of it shatters, and the golden things inside scatter. Some roll, others bounce. A golden watch is destroyed. Will spits down into the sea of treasure at his feet.

Will says, "I wish we'd never come here. You're the worst thing that's ever happened to me." His chest heaves. "I won't ever do this again."

It happens, too quickly for Will to run. He is grabbed by the back of the neck and turned, spun, like a woman on the dance floor, such that he is dizzy upon meeting eyes with himself in the mirror. Hannibal behind him, holding him in python-grip, with one arm locked around Will's middle and his free hand with Will's right hand, pushing his thumb into the wrapped wound and causing Will to cry out. Hannibal jolts Will to still him.

Will stares at himself, and doesn't rightly recognize: this man whose eyes are filled with tears, whose face is a cocktail of weariness and panic. Hannibal's face is obscured, hidden by Will's curls. His mouth in Will's ear.

"I can tell you are still a child, Will, because you have not yet grasped it. This is not about me. It could have been anyone, anyone who dared to pursue you through your seeming. The Matthew Browns of the world. Their haphazard, ungainly chase after a lovely butterfly – one which can light for a time but is never properly caught. And your husband." His breath heated, the span of his chest at Will's back massive. "Your husband. Any fool could see you love him. But love is tepid water compared to the arctic ocean which is habit. Shockingly cold, and new with each dip of a toe into its bounty."

Will is in tremors, sobbing, sobbing.

Hannibal squeezes his hand until it bleeds freshly, and wets the bandages. Will cannot see his expression, for the tears and his hair, but he thinks it to be calm, he thinks it to be even. Hannibal says, "You spoke of endgames. They don't exist. It is the vista of forever."

Will tears himself away, and peripherally is aware he can only do so for Hannibal's allowance. He whirls until his lower back is pressed up against the counter. His face marred by regret and hate. He is screaming: "*Fine!* Just do it– that's what this is about– you want to

fuck me again, just do it, you're going to anyway so get it over with, fucking get it *over with!*"

Hannibal is as Will thought. Even. Calm. The sun drains from his eyes. Hannibal raises a hand as if in gentlemanly invitation. He says, "Undress."

Chapter End Notes

Holy hell.

Turbine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"F-Fuck... Hannibal, just—" Breath hitches. "Ah, fuck—" Head hits the glass. "Mmm. I." Knots of spine against marble. "*God.*"

Hannibal says nothing. Never does. Will has noticed this, in little lucid moments he experiences through the haze. The bright spots of clarity that are only so brilliant for the cloud of gloom and euphoria that surround them. As Will screams, or cries out, moans or curses, he is only ever met with deep-toned groans and slight murmurs that don't really add up to anything he can discern.

Will lies back-down on the bathroom counter, betwixt the twin sinks. The hard marble pressing against him with each thrust from Hannibal at the part of his legs. One knee over Hannibal's shoulder, the other leg splayed open. Will's back curved terribly, the back of his head against the mirror, smacking once and twice and again and again. Hannibal looming over him, grabbing, pulling. Teeth bared slight. Every other moment, he presses haphazard kisses or open-mouthed sucks to Will's rose skin. A shoulder. The collarbone. The corner of his mouth. He bares his teeth more in these moments, such that Will is afraid he will bite. He flinches from each contact.

For, despite Will's red status, a bite mark will be too easy to see.

Will struggles, and tastes his own blood on his lips. The bandages on his hands are soaked through, reopened by Hannibal's meddling. When Will first undressed here in the bathroom, the cool of the air conditioning hitting the naked plains of his body, he attempted to hit Hannibal. Smack him across the face. For his tears, his vision blurred, he caught but the tip of the man's chin. Hannibal shoved him back into the counter. Pushed him onto the counter. Will pushed back against his face, smearing blood across his lips.

In the random placement of Hannibal's mouth, he has given some of the blood back to Will. Will swallows it through gritted teeth.

His screams echo. Strangled, strange things, louder here than in the bedroom. Hannibal's mouth against Will's throat, Hannibal thrusting into him. Hands abandoning Will's waist and shoulder for his thighs, holding him without recourse.

His mouth holding open. Pointed teeth grazing against Will's pulse.

"I-If you— If you bite me," Will gasps, eyes watering, mouth red, "I'll kill you. I swear— ah! Ah, fuck, God, Hannibal, I will kill you if—"

Hannibal pushes in completely, pulling Will further into him and Will shrieks, groans, back arching from the counter, the crown of his head pushing into the mirror. Such a fine arch he could almost see himself. Hannibal pulls out at once, and the stabbing ice of emptiness

hits Will terribly. The thunderhead rumbles, prickled with pain, and no small amount of anger.

Will jerks his head forward, eyes lit. "W-Wh–"

Hannibal flips him. Hand on the back of Will's knee, he pulls and turns until Will is on his feet on the floor, bent over the counter. Hannibal is breathing heavy, ragged, and lines them up again.

Will is staring at himself.

"Say it again," Hannibal mutters, placing himself over Will. Chest against Will's upper back. The heat and softness of curled hair. Will feels Hannibal rigid and pressing up against him. Just the start of him barely inside Will; both a threat and a temptation. "What you said– just now." Hannibal's voice in his ear. "Say it again."

Will swallows. How are his eyes so green? He has never seen anything so green as his own eyes. How? Did the color originate here? Did it spread from Will into the desperate valleys of the earth? Did no such color exist before his own birth?

Will's mouth moves: "Wh... I don't–"

Hannibal is inside him again, without warning, as it always is. There is no lightning before this clap of thunder. There is no heralding. Only the most pitiable of cries in its wake, that which comes from Will, from his parted pink mouth, and there are spots of blood in his teeth. His hands aching from holding flat to the counter, his cuts stretching.

His hipbones, his thighs, hitting straight against the edge of the counter. It is terrible pain, aided by Hannibal behind him. The rough, fast strokes. The roll of his hips that hints at a care for Will's pleasure but is only ever used to play Will like a violin or a harp, producing melodious sound that fills the room. Hannibal has never cared for Will's pleasure – this thought is prevalent in the thunderhead. And Will has never cared for Hannibal's. They are each of them a means to an end, the gatekeepers to this place of paradox: silent and loud, pain and pleasure, nothingness and everything.

Will cries out, "I'll kill you! I'll kill you if you b-bite me!" Hannibal's hand gripping his side, then his shoulder, his foot spreading Will's legs wider. His other hand forcing a divine arch into Will's back. Deep, now deeper. "I'll kill you, Hannibal, I swear, if you–"

Hannibal places his mouth on Will's shoulder. His teeth, slightly pressing. It sends Will into blind panic and he is bucking back and pushing Hannibal's hands from him, screaming, as if he is being killed, "I'll kill you I'll kill you don't you fucking do it Hannibal don't bite me please don't please Hannibal don't God stop don't do it don't–"

Hannibal grips him – his heated flesh between his legs and he releases a long moan against Will's shoulder, coming, throbbing desperately and with the forgotten flick of the wrist, Will is coming too. Against the counter. With tears in his eyes. With Hannibal still inside him, still pulsating. Will catches sight of himself once again in the last throes of his

orgasm, with Hannibal clamped around him like a heavy python, and in this very second Will doesn't recognize himself.

Though this lasts only a second.

The aftermath: like cleaning up in post-hurricane weather. The streets in tatters, telephone poles down. Power outages and hefty palm tree leaves strewn in the yards. An overcast sky and a mugginess in the air that oppresses even those inside a house. Will picks up his clothes from the floor, amidst the jewelry and some shards of the lamp. He dresses in the bedroom, and Hannibal does so in the bathroom. All that hangs in the air is the soft churn of the air conditioner and the slow sounds of fabric being pulled across skin.

When they are fully dressed, Hannibal walks with Will down into the foyer. Will turns at the door to look fully at Hannibal. In his jeans, he feels come running down his leg, and only now is he hyper-aware of it.

Hannibal's hair is lightly mussed. It looks darker in the shadows. Will thinks he must look rose-pink, and he feels his hands throbbing, and longs for a shower.

"I hated that book," Will says. His voice hoarse.

Hannibal asks, "Did you like any of them?"

"Not so much." He shrugs. "Guess we just have different tastes."

"I suppose so."

Will nods once, and takes a foot back, turned towards the front door.

Hannibal says, "Wherever you may go, Will. It will be like this. Men will come for you, and you will let them."

Will makes a sound – a snort of derision, or perhaps sorrow. "Goodbye, Hannibal." He turns fully, and takes his hand to the doorknob. He is halfway out of the door, the sun on his arms, laying down the fine hairs, before he hears it:

"Goodbye, Will."

Will crosses the ravine.

*

He thought he would want a cold shower. Something to freeze Hannibal's lingering touches, and then to melt away in the warmth of the afternoon sun. Yet Will found himself longing for heat, a boiling heat, and when he stepped from the shower he felt raw and blooming. In the mirror above his own twin sinks, he knuckled away fog and looked at his pink face. Luminous eyes.

"I'm Will Chilton," he said. "That's right. I know who I am."

Dried his hair lightly, and spent time with his laptop opened on his bed. He traipsed about the room between clicks on a realty website. The same one they used to find this house. He supposes Frederick would like to stay at the hospital – there is no need for him to return to private practice. Then, somewhere equal distance from the hospital. But on the other side of the city. Far, far away from here. From any whisperings of these things. Yes, that will do well.

He could barely keep himself from imagining it. Page by page of houses, and Will thinking to apply what he's learned here to the new house. Better furniture, matching colors, drapes that reach the floor.

A designer? Could he hire a designer? He would have to talk it over with Frederick. But it might be agreeable.

Will paid careful attention. Made sure he was no longer leaking come, and upon wiping the last of it away, he thought: *Goodbye, goodbye to all that.*

He crossed the street to the Crawford home. Passed the spot at Beverly's house where there now only stands a lonely and bereft stump. The orange cat that had taken residence was gone, secreted under a rose bush perhaps. When the door opened to him, he expected Beverly's raucous sounds from the living room but Phyllis relayed to him that it was to be just the two of them. She said she hadn't been feeling well, and Will's stomach trembled lightly.

He beads in the sunlit living room, on the couch beside Phyllis. She helps him double-tie it to an end.

"Does it look like a bracelet?" Will asks. It is red with just a few dots of blue, and the beads are slightly askew. Simple, and terribly crafted.

Phyllis holds it aloft with gentle brown fingers. "Um," she says.

"Can he– do you think he can wear it?"

"Oh, I'm sure. Let's call it an anklet."

Will takes it back from her and he also holds it up. Squints. He has never seen Frederick wear any jewelry but his own wedding ring. Would he wear this? There can't be any harm in presenting it to him. And perhaps, if he keeps it up, he can continue to grow in prowess, as he has done with cooking.

Will looks over at Phyllis. "Did you know? We're moving."

She blinks widely. "I didn't! So soon?"

Will begins to nod. Clenches the anklet. Yes, it's an anklet. A smile spreads his lips. "Yeah, so soon."

The evening is red. The sun travels with Frederick, half-blinding him for its position in the sky. He tilts down the visor, and still he squints. When he turns off of the highway for his exit, he is at last given some relief.

Today in therapy, he spoke softly to Bedelia, as if someone were listening on just the other side of the door. That crying couple, perhaps. Or the ones that do not look at each other.

"Will wants to move. I told him we could."

Bedelia's body language is foreign to Frederick. It has taken him much time just to attribute her blinking to nodding. What followed was some adjustment in her posture, which Frederick couldn't decide to be relief or discomfort. She said, "This decision was recently made?"

"Last night. He was crying." Frederick looked towards the windows at the still-high sun. "He said he hated our neighborhood, our neighbors. And that he wanted to move. I can't honestly say I'm disappointed, just... shocked, I suppose."

"Perhaps it's for the best."

Relief, then. Frederick nodded. "Maybe he's too lonely to stay there. After not being with Hannibal. Maybe he really doesn't like Phyllis and Beverly after all."

"Maybe so."

Frederick hummed. "Poor Will."

Bedelia blinked. So slow. "Poor you, Frederick."

"And you, Bedelia."

She straightened the hem of her dress. "Poor everybody."

Presently, Frederick drives into the wooden fold of Sol Terrace. The lights begin to blink and burn in the wake of the Escalade, and the red sunset rolls over the black finish. Soon, he will no longer call this place home. For the best, perhaps, but he feels something gelled in his heart that quivers when he thinks of their home soon emptied. He remembers looking at it on the realty site and imagining their new life together. Living here for years to come. But things chance so quickly.

He parks in his driveway, and the Audi has beaten him. Their houses stand like illumined twins. From the open window in his own kitchen, a scent wafts out into the evening air and mixes with others; and Frederick thinks about this, how strangely in unison they are. All of Sol Terrace is making dinner, and people are returning from long days out in Baltimore. And then, at the weekend, they will all move from their homes to that of Kade Prurnell's, a suburban pilgrimage.

How odd, Frederick thinks. And he turns on his heel, away from his home. He crosses the street still warm from July day. Goes to the soft grasses of his adjacent neighbor, and finds himself at Beverly Katz's doorstep of sandcrete.

He knocks.

When she comes to the door, she is slightly red-eyed and Frederick sees her now as he saw her last night, and his pity fills him up, and slowly leaks out. She stands in a long white shirt in the doorway, perhaps her husband's. There is a distinct scent – like chili, which emanates from the warm cavern of her home. She holds the door open with a oven mitt-clad hand.

"Frederick," she says, adjusting her countenance. Smiling. "Hey, what's up?"

"Oh, I'm really sorry to bother you."

"It's not a bother! Uh, what do you need? Cup of sugar or something?"

Frederick cannot tell if she's joking. "I just." He shrugs, moving one shoulder back to the stump in her yard. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. About what happened last night."

She looks over his shoulder. Her eyes widening, deepening, for only an instant, then she warms into herself. "Ah, it's no big deal. Kade is Kade." She pats the door with her mitt. "It was just a tree."

Is that what your husband said? "Still. I wish I could've helped."

"You did help," she says. Her eyebrows tent, and again she looks over his shoulder. Past the stump, it seems. "You really did. That was so sweet of you, raising your hand for me."

"Eh." Frederick cannot help the warmth at his nose and neck. "Will said that too. And I'll tell you the same thing I told him– it didn't do much good." He shrugs. "But I'm glad it meant something to you."

"Everyone—" She pauses, looks aside at the Crawford house two yards over. Her profile catches the blood orange light. "Everyone around here is pretty much only for themselves. Well, their pairs. You know? They do what the other does, and they don't really care about the neighbors and stuff. Making waves, you know. I think it's... I think it must be hard to care about more than one person at a time. Getting so caught up in stuff every day, sometimes it's hard just to constantly care about one person, never mind the whole damn neighborhood." Her eyelids lower. The mitt sliding against the door. "Still."

Frederick watches her, and nods slowly. "I know what you mean."

Beverly swallows. Turns back to Frederick completely. "Uh, anyway."

"Right." Frederick smiles, takes a step back. "I– Beverly."

"Yeah?"

Frederick steadies himself, but cannot find it in him to look her in the eye. He focuses on her hand, her oven mitt, at the door. "There's something else. I also wanted to say I'm

sorry for... what happened before. When you, well, when someone happened to see you through your window."

Beverly's stance adjusts. "What? You don't have to—"

"Yes. Yes, I do." He fights against himself, loses, then wins, and loses again. He flinches and raises his eyes to meet hers. "I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't mean to do it."

"I— wait."

"I meant *nothing* by it, you must believe me." He swallows, and feels itches rise along his skin. He longs to scratch at them, his arms, his legs, but is completely still. Somehow he manages this. "But if you don't, I of course understand. I should not have been there."

"Oh. Oh, Frederick." Her gaze melts and Frederick hardly recognizes the soft, tender look she is giving him. It makes her seem a completely different person. "Of course I believe you. Hey, don't worry. I won't tell anyone, okay?"

Frederick's redness heightens. "Thank you. So much. It's just, if Jack knew, he might—"

"*Please*. If Jack knew it was *you*, then he *really* wouldn't indulge Kade anymore. Hell, if Kade knew, *she* might even shut up. We all really like you, Frederick."

He isn't sure what to do with this information, or how to respond. He only smiles, lightly, and shrugs a bit. He figures he should not press his luck, and begins a steady and delicate retreat. One step back, off the sandcrete. "Thank you," he says. "For being so understanding. I'll, um, I'll see you around."

"Neighborhood Association." She jerks a shoulder towards Kade's house.

"Right." Takes another step back. "Neighborhood Association." He stands in the grass in his suit, his black Oxfords, and looks back at the stump. Ants make a trail over it, and the rings inside are nigh hypnotizing. He sighs. "It really was a nice tree."

Beverly is nodding and Frederick begins to turn around. He is sure Will is wondering where he is, or perhaps if there is traffic. Maybe he has already looked to see his car there.

"Frederick."

He stops, nearing the edge of Beverly's property where a lamppost burns beside him on the sidewalk. Turns back. "Yeah?"

She presses her lips together, looks again to the side of her house, then the other. Then over Frederick's shoulder. She waves him back in a frantic fashion, and as he approaches, her countenance of bemusement has melted and Frederick cannot parse it for he has not seen its like before. If he had to name something akin to it, it would perhaps be guilt. Guilt's sister.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

Unease. Unease passes over her face. "I, well. I was thinking. I was thinking I wouldn't say anything, but." She is looking at their feet – Frederick's shoes, her bare and scrunched toes. "But. You were honest with me, so."

"What is it?"

"I– listen, yesterday..." She bites her lip. "Yesterday, I was, um... so I went to your house..."

She continues to speak. Her lips continue to move. Pink, darkening in the oncoming night. Her porch light blinks twice before burning fully as she continues. And Frederick stares from a few feet apart, immersed in her language. Her use of verbs, the shock of Will's name on her tongue, and the shudder in his spine he experiences as she goes on and on and on.

And that is not all.

For, from somewhere, there is another sound present. Buzzing, lowly, just in the background. As Beverly's lips continue to move, as her eyes darken and redden, the sound amplifies. What is it? He cannot place it. What could be making that strange sound– but now, ah, he recognizes it. The sound of the planes from Baltimore-Washington International. The way they sound just outside of Bedelia's office in downtown, and how they have of late continually grown louder. The way he imagines they would be on the runway. And Beverly's lips in continual motion and the sound is deafening, it is as if Frederick is in the cargo hold or the turbine, yes, the turbine, being shredded to pieces.

*

Frederick stands at the front door to his house, key ring in hand. And he finds he cannot go in, so he moves quietly around the house, in the shadows on the right side. He cannot go in just yet. No, not just yet. He places the keys back into his pocket and his back lawn is lush green and springy, well-kept and shorn courtesy of Y and L and all the dues Frederick has poured into the Neighborhood Association. He walks over the lawn towards the belt of trees. At the line between his yard and the wilder grasses, he takes pause. The wind blows in his hair. His eyes are red and soggy, unseen now for the dense foliage overhead. The darkness that abounds. There are sounds, more sounds, nothing like the airplane. This is different; happier, shrilling cries and something like soft music. Frederick moves into the trees, hollies and sugar maples that sway in the breeze, that present summer perfume. The denseness covers him, shrouds him, and burrs stick into his argyle socks, and a rough outreaching twig snags his suit jacket. The music is gentle, and there is light nearing the clearing of trees ahead. Soft bubbles of light, not so unlike the lampposts in Sol Terrace. The light creates an open space and Frederick dare not step into it. He watches from his place at the edge of the bower where he looks into the backyard of a Luna Terrace home. And music plays from a boom box on a table in the grass. The light comes from tiki-lamps at four corners of the yard and sitting in a small circle are children, girls, perhaps no more than thirteen in age. From the house, also lit, the glass patio door, there are dogs barking inside. Frederick tries to count them and cannot. Numerous. And the girls laugh and shove each other jovially, they drink from bottles of Pepsi, and eat Lays from a blue plastic bowl. One of the girls lies down in the grass, her long brown hair beneath her. And her eyes, startlingly blue, wide on the night

above. And Frederick realizes he has been sharing the planet with these girls for perhaps thirteen years now. And he has never known. No, he has never known.

*

The key in the door, the door opening. The foyer light is near to blinding and Frederick squints reflexively, shielding one eye with a hand. As he comes to close the door, he hears footsteps hurrying in from the kitchen. The scents from the open archway surround Frederick, and he picks at a shred of twig lodged in the fabric of his coat.

"Ricky," Will says, walking now into the foyer. He is alabaster. From beyond the hems of his shirt and jeans, his arms and feet and face are all the color of yore, when Frederick first laid eyes on him. So long ago behind a coffee bar. Frederick notes this with dull surprise. Can he say now that he misses the red? It is not missing, precisely, but something close to it. Another sister. Will stands before him, eyes widening on the state of his clothes. "You're really dirty! I was worried about you. I saw your car outside— do you have your phone on you?"

Frederick touches his pocket. Feels his phone. "Uh huh," he says.

"Well, I was calling you." Will pauses now, and looks into Frederick's eyes. Frederick cannot know what Will sees there. If he were to hazard a guess, it would hinge more on what he does not see there. "Hey." Will touches him. His shoulder. "You okay? Where'd you go anyway?"

"Outside," he says. "Out to the backyard."

Will raises an eyebrow. "The backyard?"

Frederick looks at his skin. He takes his fingertips along Will's bare arm. He has not seen him unmarred in months. He cannot see any lines where the runes have been. It is as if nothing was ever there.

Nothing ever was there, he reminds himself. *Nothing but suspicion and sorrow.*

"Mm," Frederick says.

Will allows Frederick this— this strange touching. Frederick touches Will's chin, his jaw, the stubble there. Will smiles, one eyebrow raised. "You okay, up there?" And he points to Frederick's temple. Frederick traces a small circle with his thumb on Will's cheek. "That tickles, you know. Ricky, hey, you're acting... weird."

"Am I?"

"Come in the kitchen, dinner is cold. I'll have to warm it up." He takes Frederick by the wrist. "I was looking at houses today, online. Think we should just pick one and go? Like, we could really move next week. A lot of our stuff isn't even unpacked."

Frederick stays in the foyer. "What's the hurry?"

Will looks back. His curls shine in the florescence, and just behind him stands the racehorse, his eyes filled with the weariness that comes only with knowledge. "I can't stand this place," Will says. "I told you. I hate it."

"Things haven't been working out with Beverly and Phyllis?"

"They're okay." Will blinks quickly, and reaches with his other hand towards his back pocket. "Hey, I have—"

"Do you miss hanging out with Hannibal?"

Will pauses, the lighthearted sliver left in his expression gone. As if Frederick had blown it away so suddenly.

"No," Will says softly. "I don't. I hate him, actually. I don't ever want to see him again."

"Why?"

"Your eye."

"And?"

"No and really." Will tugs again on Frederick's wrist; lightly, for the bandages on his hand. Frederick notices he has re-wrapped them and they cover a larger area now. The fullness of his palms. "He's just— just a jerk."

Frederick feels tired. "Okay," he says. "Well, why did you go see him yesterday?"

Will starts to release Frederick's wrist, then suddenly holds tighter to it. "I—"

"Don't lie," Frederick says.

"R-Ricky, I didn—"

Frederick looks at him.

Will's chest rises and falls quicker. Just a bit. He presses his lips together. "I did. Okay, I did, but it's not like that, I went over there because I still had a book of his. Ricky, how did yo—"

"Beverly told me."

Will's shoulders tremble. Frederick watches him with something like fascination. As he has always watched Will. For Will is, in any situation, terribly beautiful and unceasingly interesting. Frederick has never once grown bored with him. Not in all their years of marriage. Will has never said a boring word. How is it that someone can be interesting all the time? Frederick has never known anyone else like that. Not a soul.

"Hey," Will says, turning fully to Frederick and taking both wrists in hands. "Hey, it's—"

"She told me what she saw. On your leg."

"I."

"Will." The word sounds strange on his tongue. How can it? He has said it so many times. So, so many. Frederick swallows over a lump in his throat and takes his wrists away, tugs them away, for Will's beseeching grip. He moves in the direction opposite the kitchen, towards the living room. The scent of the cooling food is turning his stomach. It smells like risotto.

Will is following him, silently. Frederick can hear the fret and alarm in every footstep. Frederick sits on the couch, in the darkened room. He is exhausted.

Will stands at the end of the couch, body emanating static. He should be glowing red. But he is Will again, pale Will, lovely Will, Will who is not a demon at all, just a cheater.

Frederick retches, once, briefly. Continues to sit.

"R-Ricky, I know—" His voice watery, now, and trembling, and devolving more and more into that childish tone he uses when he is in trouble. As if he is awaiting, or trying to avoid, punishment. "I know this sounds really bad but he—"

"He what, Will?" Frederick asks. The window is wide open and the street is sedate, quiet. Beverly's house is lit up. "Did he make you?"

"N... No. I... but I made a mistake, if you'd just let me explain, I, it was just... just—"

"Okay. How many times?"

Will is sobbing. Head in his hands. "I-I don't know, Ricky, fuck, I'm so sorry, but I swear I'll never do it again, I just want to leave, I want to go, I don't ever want to see him again, he means nothing, *less* than nothing, I can't *stand* him—"

"Oh, Will."

"It was a mistake, it was a huge mistake, I hate myself, Ricky, I hate myself for doing it, I just, I don't know why—"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"B-B-Because Ricky, if I did I thought you wouldn't understand that I made a—"

"Not that." Frederick folds his hands in his lap. The lampposts outside burn on and the trees sway light with breezes. The summer perfume on the wind was terribly lovely when he stepped out of the car. He can still smell it, even over the scent of perspiration from Will. His mouth moves carefully, but he hears his words from a distance: "Why didn't you tell me who you were? Eight years ago? Five years ago. Earlier than this. Why didn't Matthew and

Hannibal happen earlier? I've loved you more and more each day. This would have been easier to swallow, at some other time. When I was less in love. Why do you have to show me now, Will? When I am—" He retches again, lurches, tamps it down. "When I am so deep in it? So deep in you?"

Will's sobbing is louder, sharper, and he comes onto the couch, bouncing the cushions with his weight. His face in the lap of Frederick's slacks, fists balled tightly. Frederick thinks he must be in terrible pain from the cuts on his hands.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he's screaming, and it hurts Frederick's ears – the high-pitchedness of it. Just last night he was crying here as well, begging to move. Frederick feels some slight vertigo. Is he daydreaming? Is this real?

Frederick looks down. He sees Will, the man he married. His form like a shadow in the dark. Writhing, clawing at him. Sobbing, sobbing. Something in Frederick, still fervent and crying out, is beating at bars somewhere in Frederick's skull. Telling him, *You must console him! He's crying, he's sorry!*

Oh, Frederick has always had such inclinations towards Will. He says, a soft whisper to the shadow in his lap, "I wish you had told me. Though—" Lurches again. Calms. "Though even if you had, I might not have believed it."

Will rises up on shuddering arms. And at this distance, mere inches away, Frederick can see him, his bright green eyes moving like water, his blush-pink face, the tears saturating his stubble. Curls like satin.

Will's voice wet when he says: "I'm Will! Ricky, I'm not anyone else, I'm not like this—" He takes the lapels of Frederick's coat and twists, grips, until Frederick is sure he can smell the blood from Will's cuts. "I'm your husband and I love you. Please."

Frederick exhales slightly, and his gaze travels from Will's wild eyes to the window again. The stagnant street. Picturesque. Like the backyard from Luna. The girls sitting and laughing the summer away. The dogs barking in the house. And the music— Frederick still cannot place it. He's never heard its like. He doubts he ever will again.

"Let's go," Will says, urgently, as if someone is chasing him. He reaches back again for his pocket and presents Frederick with something knotted with beads. He takes Frederick's hand and shoves it in, forces him to take ownership of it. Though Frederick does not know why. "Please, let's move, let's do it next week, as soon as possible, and we'll leave this all behind. This was a huge mistake and it's *my* fault but I want to *fix* it. Please, Ricky, *baby*, please, I love you and I know you love me so please."

Frederick's eyes lose focus.

"Ricky?"

Frederick jolts. Exhales largely, and his gaze is brought slowly into focus and slowly into Will. Roaming the scenery of his face again, as if he is remembering eight years together. A lush vale fringed with grey gulch. The landscape of eternity.

Will's voice, beseeching him from across a canyon: "Ricky, please. Please."

Frederick swallows. And at length, he slowly opens his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

And so...

Endgame

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Right. Before we get to proper business, I think I need to say something about—" Kade lowers the meeting agenda into her lap. She pauses and looks around the lushness of her living room, seems to search the face of each irritated member present. From her place in the crimson armchair, she clears her throat at Freddie who is texting on the other side of her leg. Then, continuing: "Community."

Jack and Phyllis look at each other.

"Now," says Kade, "I feel as if, lately, there's been some – mm, shall we say, *dissension*." Her gaze bounces along those on the couch, the loveseat, to land directly at Beverly, who looks to be thinking of something else. "I mean, I'm not blind. I know we have some ill feelings floating around. Well, I want to clear the air. As you all know, I am nothing if not dedicated to the well-being and livelihood of Sol Terrace."

Someone coughs. It sounds like Brian.

Kade sends the entire room a wry glance, yet goes on: "It's true. I've always had a great love for this place and it is because of that love, and my vast amount of compassion for my neighbors, that I have been so – perhaps overmuch – *enthusiastic* in seeing our problems ended. This includes but is not limited to our fiendish peeping tom, who must have also stolen my mail, and the oak tree incident."

Beverly looks to sigh, and flips a lock of dark hair back over her shoulder. The room is flooded in evenlight and reds and oranges soak into her skin. It too touches the soft bubbles in several champagne glasses on the coffee table, each padded by embroidered coasters. For a moment it is silent, save the minute taps of Freddie's manicured fingers against her phone screen.

The light from the window touches the left of Kade's face. And in this way she looks younger, the edges of her being less sharp. She folds a hand over the agenda. "I may have been— pushy. And for this, I want to say I'm sorry."

The room continues in silence; this moment lighter with confusion, and Jimmy looks to Brian and Brian is studying the ceiling. He taps at the stem of his glass.

Jimmy sighs and says, "Well, Kade, that's very kind of you."

"Yes," she says, nodding, "Jack and I are profusely sorry—"

"Kade, why am I being dragged into this?" he asks, ignoring his wife's quiet suggestion that he should let it go.

Brian shrugs. "You did raise your hand on the Beverly thing."

"So did you," Jack says, raising his voice despite Phyllis tugging on his shirt tail. He looks over to Beverly, eyebrows tented, and turns again before she can meet his gaze. "So did everyone! I don't think I should have to apologize—"

Beverly raises her hand, half-limp. She points with curled fingers across the coffee table to the loveseat where Will and Frederick sit side-by-side, glasses held lightly in their laps. The two of them with similar expressions on their faces: wondering, dazed eyes, dark rings beneath and an air about them as if they are not meant to be here. That they came by mistake, wandered in. Or forgot something left behind.

Beverly says, "They didn't."

Jack pauses, following her finger-point. "Right."

"Oh, yes," Kade says, looking down now into her agenda. She brightens, perhaps relieved to move forward. "And speaking of our good Chilton neighbors, they will be moving at the end of this upcoming week. Seems rather sudden. We shall all miss their dues, and their presence."

Jimmy kicks back a huge gulp of his champagne. He raises the drained glass. "That house empties faster than the condom aisle on prom night."

Kade says, tersely, and raising her own glass: "I think he means, 'to Frederick and Will.'"

"To Frederick and Will."

Everyone present tips back their glasses. And Will and Frederick nod appropriately and sip from their own. Kade moves on to more pressing matters and in the din of quarrel and complaints, they two look at each other. Will offers something of a smile, and touches Frederick's thigh with such tenderness. Frederick gives him a slight nod, and turns his body away, to heed Kade.

*

The week felt long. But somehow this feels longer.

Will's heart still has not moved from his throat. He can barely speak over it, and when he does, when he overcomes such an obstacle, it does not seem to matter for Frederick does not respond. It is as if he had not spoken at all. Enduring this for the week – the mornings of quiet breakfasts, bereft goodbyes at the door where Frederick did not stay for a kiss, and terribly awkward dinners where Will could not get through half the meal without crying. And selfishly, so selfishly, he thought each time, through his sorrow: *I am crying. Why isn't he consoling me? Why isn't he hugging me?*

The voice in him, the only thing responding in Frederick's vocal absence: *You know you don't deserve it.*

I know I don't, Will thought with his head in his hands, across from a husband quietly cutting into his steak. *That doesn't mean I don't want it.*

He had the days to himself. Long, and so short. He wandered about the house, repacking boxes. Most of them hadn't been discarded – merely folded into large closets that littered the upper floors. Will stuffed clothes into them from the back of the closet, things neither of them would wear in the next week. He has found a house on the other side of Baltimore, a colonial style in a suburb with much more space between the houses. Each one fenced in. The website said it was a great space for dogs.

Will showed the listing to Frederick one night over dinner, and asked if it would be okay. Frederick shrugged, and left the table prematurely.

Will thinks this is worse than the first time. The first time, even immediately after, wasn't like this. Frederick spoke to him, sometimes just lackluster sighs, but it was something. It was something. Will supposes that was when the marks first appeared on him. Perhaps Frederick spoke to him just to cover his shock and horror.

The only thing Will can count as positive is the lace of beads Frederick wears on his left wrist. He has it when he leaves for work, and wears it to bed though it causes small welted dips in his skin at night. Will watches it on him – and he cannot help but feel a trickle of pride. It is love, is it not? Just as much as the wedding rings they wear. Frederick must know, somewhere inside him, that Will loves him – that Will never felt a sliver of the same for either Matthew or Hannibal.

Hannibal.

Just the name fills Will with sickness. Throughout the week, Will has kept the blinds shut, the curtains drawn, tightly so that hardly any light shown down into the basin of the house. He did not want to chance seeing the man from across the ravine, for although he respected Will's goodbye, Will has known he would feel an urgent roiling in his gut. It has turned from simmer to boil since Frederick will not look at him, or kiss him, and certainly no sex has passed between them. Their bed in the nights as cold as the arctic. Frederick on his side, staring up at the ceiling. Will on his side, staring at Frederick.

The only thing Frederick has said to Will since Will cried in his lap that night was: *Okay.*

Just that.

Just *that*.

So awed was Will by this that he nearly stopped crying. Just stared in the half-dark at Frederick with a tear-soaked face, panting, eyebrows tented.

"W... What?" he asked, breathless.

Frederick looked at him. He seemed in a daze. Again, he said it. "Okay."

And Will did not hear much in the way of words from him until this evening, at the Neighborhood Association meeting. The last one they will attend. Frederick spoke to Kade briefly before most of the others arrived, and told her about their leaving. She did not much seem to notice Will's presence and asked Frederick why. He smiled at her – Will's stomach pinched in longing for one of those directed at him – and said they never stay anywhere very long.

In the night, now, the bedroom is quiet. The air conditioner whirs softly, and most of the blankets are kicked to the foot of the bed. Will and Frederick lie beneath one sheer sheet and Will cannot tell Frederick's expression in the dark. Yet he feels him awake.

Will takes count of his own breaths. Deepens them, evens them. The clock on the nightstand blinks 10:26 PM. Will reaches over and touches Frederick's arm. He does not flinch for it, and Will counts this too as positive.

He says, softly, "Ricky."

Frederick exhales.

"Ricky." A thick swallow. Light fingertip touches on the man's forearm. "We can't—we can't not speak."

Nothing.

Will continues: "I know—I know it might take a while. But I— I don't want us to— to have another two months where we don't have sex."

Frederick says nothing and for a moment Will resolves himself to try again later. Perhaps the morning. But Frederick suddenly turns to him, just his head. And Will cannot tell his expression. He says, "Right. If we don't, you'll just have sex with someone else."

Will begins to cry. Frederick turns his back, and goes to sleep.

*

The weekend passes in stilted silence and nods and wide berths given in the halls. On Monday morning, when Frederick leaves the breakfast table, he goes to the door and stops himself before leaving. He can feel Will just behind him, lingering in the foyer archway like an unsure pup.

Frederick sighs and turns, and in doing so he sees the racehorse who has looked of late rather dead in the eyes. He sees nothing, for he has seen everything, and no longer cares for the sense. Frederick looks across the cavernous room and feels his skin sag on his bones.

"Will," he says. "I'm— I shouldn't have said that. The other night."

Will swallows. They had eggs and maple bacon, and the coffee was perfection. Frederick cannot get enough of it, and he looks dourly ahead to the sort that will be prepared by Bailey. Will steps onto the marble with bare pale feet.

"S'okay," he murmurs. "I understand."

No, Frederick thinks but will not say. *No, you really don't.*

Will takes another step forward. Hands held behind his back, and his curls riotously askew. He says, "I really want to kiss you."

Frederick inhales, holds the breath, then lets it go. He takes a hand to waist-height and beckons for Will. His footsteps are quick, almost rushed, as if Frederick is offering only for a moment. Or a second. Will's mouth on his is warm, sweet, and tastes of hazelnuts from the coffee. Frederick keeps his eyes open, and looks past Will's hair to the racehorse. He struggles to close them, and finds he cannot. At length, he breaks the kiss and presses his lips together.

He cannot parse Will's expression – it is somewhere between joy and fear. Frederick decides he does not like it, something in it makes him feel uneasy, and so he calmly tells Will he will be back in the evening. They exchange goodbyes and though Frederick thinks Will would be agreeable, clamoring even, for another kiss, he does not have it in him presently. He leaves.

*

"Do you blame me?" she asks.

"I don't blame you."

"It's all right if you do." Pause. "I might blame me too, were I in your position."

"You *have* been in my position, Bedelia. Maybe there wasn't someone who knew enough to tell you. But you felt the same things."

"Do you believe Hannibal said the same things to me as Will said to you?"

"No." A snort of laughter. "Something tells me Hannibal isn't the crying type. The begging type."

"Something tells you right."

"Hey, Bedelia."

"Yes, Frederick."

"Do you feel sorry for me?"

A longer pause. "No."

"Are you telling me what I want to hear?"

"Did you tell Will what he wanted to hear?"

"I—" Shaking his head. "I don't know. I don't know what that night was about. It's so strange. I can remember it, in something like snapshots. Beverly talking to me, the backyard—I don't know what I was doing there. I remember my skin was itching a lot, and my head felt full of bees. And I remember Will looking at me, tugging at me. Then begging. Then shoving this—" Raises his beaded wrist. "Into my hands. I thought I might yell, like I did the first time in Boston. I thought I might scream at him— for just a second, Bedelia, I felt like I wanted to *hit* him. I never *would*. But I *wanted* to. To let him feel just a bit of pain for once— and caused by someone else. Someone he trusts." Lowers his wrist again. "It almost feels like nothing. Like it didn't matter."

"Like nothing. And yet you didn't come to your appointments for the rest of last week."

"I needed time. To think."

"And what have you thought about?"

"Your husband inside mine."

"Does it make you feel anything?"

"Yes. And—" Exhales.

"And?"

"And no. Nothingness." Places a hand over the left side of his chest. "Where did it go?"

Slowly blinking. "Now you know."

"What it's like to be you."

"Yes."

"But, Bedelia—" Touches the beads. "I don't want to *be* you."

"No one wants to be me." She looks at him. Her eyes bright. Glossy. She whispers: "I don't even want to be me."

*

In mid-afternoon, Will lies, naked, on the kitchen floor.

He has kept the curtains drawn, the blinds flattened, but beneath all the windows in the house he has thrown open the sashes. And in washes summer scents, that of freshly shorn grass and lingering chlorine from Luna, and daytime shouts, high-pitched from girl children and soft bells from bikes. He has let these things in to console him, to remind him that there are others in this world and that the world still exists, it is not the end, Frederick has agreed to move with him and so there is no need to feel darkness creeping into his blood.

Yet he feels it all the same. He cannot get it out of his head— how the man looked at him in the foyer. Touching his face with such gentleness, and all the while he knew.

None but Frederick has ever touched him that way. And in the moment Will was amused by it, confused slightly and wrinkling his nose. And now his bones are rain and his blood is oil.

He lies on the floor with sweat sticking dark curls to his forehead. One hand tracing light circles into his pubic hair. The other covering his eyes, tightly, tightly covering his eyes.

How many more days?

Three, until they are gone.

He swallows down a sob and smiles something jagged. He can hold out.

*

This muggy week, Frederick has been coming home to overtly fantastic dinners. Strange, and a constant reminder of all Sol Terrace has changed in the two of them. Prior, and upon first arriving, Will would burn toast. Frederick thinks it was not outside of the realm of possibility for him to burn cereal, and yet now he comes home to:

Braised-beef tacos.

Oven-roasted rosemary chicken.

Turkey Shepherd's pie.

And tonight, a porchetta carbonara is staring at Frederick from a plate and he has never felt so hungry nor so full merely at the sight of food. He doesn't know how to handle it, and he notices Will twitching from across the granite island. He keeps doing that, then looking furtively up through his bangs to see if Frederick notices. Frederick kissed him again upon returning home, and he looked still at the racehorse, the dead-eyed thing hanging in their foyer.

Frederick takes his first bite, and says, "Let's not take the painting. The horse painting."

Will looks up fully. His eyes bright under the kitchen lighting, though he looks overly pale. Frederick cannot tell if he is sickly or if this is just a learning curve: he is pale, and not red.

Something that once knocked upon Frederick's skull says to him: *This, you must get used to.*

"I can't," Frederick says.

Will furrows his brow. "What?"

Frederick exhales. "What?"

"You— you said you can't. You can't what?"

"Sorry. Long day."

Will blinks. Rubs the prongs of his fork into the plate, creating a grating scratching sound that is music to Frederick. He says, "Okay, well. I was just going to say we don't need to take it. Really, we don't need to take anything at all. We could leave, like, right now. Forget the new house."

"What about my job?"

"Forget that too."

"What are you asking, exactly?"

Will presses his lips together, and smiles. He makes his eyes big, as he does when he is begging from Frederick, though it has an off effect, as Frederick now remembers those eyes in the aftermath of Matthew and now Hannibal. Will reaches across the table and rubs his smooth fingertips over Frederick's knuckles. "I just mean we could use a vacation, couldn't we? We could go off for a bit, then come back to Baltimore, and live in an apartment or something. Like when we first got married."

Frederick looks down at their golden rings. "You really must hate this place," he says.

"Don't you?"

Frederick moves his gaze lower along his wrist to the haphazard beads he wears. "Sometimes. Though we've learned a lot here."

Will's hand is shaking. "I don't think so."

"I do," Frederick says and continues to eat.

*

The next day is just the same, only something is happening behind Will's right eye. It is burning, feels as if it is bulging with headache, so bad he almost cries, though that is not very different from usual lately. He runs into the bathroom, nearly tripping on packed boxes in the master bedroom. Finds a small kit of pills, and takes two Advil, washes them down with tap water from the leftmost sink.

He is heated all over, and he runs the tap on cold over his head. Keeps his head in the sink for a long few minutes, shoulder angled back and arched to reach the handle. When he is minutely cooled, and the headache throbs with less intensity, he raises his dripping head and looks into the mirror.

You are gorgeous, says the sleeping thing in him, which has risen like a lazy dog to tell him this fact. Snoozing in the corner of his mind. Perhaps behind Will's right eye.

"Yeah," Will says, lightly panting. "I know."

The thing says, *All the world wants you*.

"Mmhhh," he says and, trembling, touches the glass.

*

"Every morning now, when I'm about to get into my car and head to work, I see Beverly. Do you ever notice her? She likes to sit on that stump in her yard with coffee, in her pajamas. It's never blazing that early, and the birds are singing in the hollies, and the shadows of leaves from Brian's yard pass over her face. She looks like she's thinking of something else. I don't know. The way she stares off into nothing with her chin in her hand. She looks— strange, beautiful, like some kind of woodland nymph. When I see her like that, and when I see you go to your car beside me, and when I see Jack in his uniform, I think about the neighborhood and what I like about it. I *like* these things. I wouldn't mind living there, if that's all it was."

"If those things existed stuck out of time," Bedelia says. She is bouncing one crossed foot over the other, the red stiletto catching the sunlight through the window. Her eyes calm on Frederick across the room. "But we are fixed in time, and time is all we have."

Frederick's mouth twitches. "I can't pick and choose what's in a neighborhood."

"And you cannot pick and choose what is in a person."

"A husband."

"Your husband," she says.

"And yours."

She shakes her head. "I have never tried to pick and choose what Hannibal is, or has been. He has shown himself to me, and I said exactly what you said, Frederick. I said okay."

Frederick is nodding. He was nodding before she quite finished speaking. "How long ago was that, Bedelia?"

"Ten years."

He smiles, looking at the toe of her shoe. "I'd like to commend you. I'd like to say I'm envious of you, for being able to uphold your marriage. There was a time— there was a time when that was all I wanted. To be able to say I'd made it ten years with Will. Then fifteen, and twenty."

"That is the goal. Death do us part."

"But you made a mistake ten years ago, Bedelia. Saying okay to that. It was a mistake."

She swallows. A shadow follows the bob of her throat. "Because we have done the same thing, are you now in a position to judge, Frederick? I am still your therapist."

Frederick snorts, and leans back against the leather. "Nothing about this," he says, raising a hand to the office dismissively, "has been above board. I've paid you, and you've sat here and watched me cry and all the while you knew what your husband was doing to mine."

"You said you did not blame me."

"I don't," Frederick says, voice waterlogged. "But I am—" He heaves a sigh, and his eyes are tired and red. "I am just a man. I say these things— *I don't blame you*, and *okay*, and *I can get over it*... and am I not allowed to change my mind? Am I not permitted something as human as that? What if, in retrospect, I realize I *do* blame you? Or I'm not okay, and I can't get over it?"

Bedelia, it seems, cannot answer this, and a plane goes by in the sky and Frederick twitches at the faraway sounds that linger in his ears. He sees Beverly's lips moving, and that brunette girl laying in the grass. He tells Bedelia he must be going, and she quietly shows him out. Her face a mask as ever. But beneath the calm tide lies something, and Frederick feels a great lump of pity for both of them.

"We shouldn't have done it," he says at the door. He leaves her side and watches a couple shuffle up over the carpet and show themselves into her office. He can feel her gaze upon him as he leaves. Goes down the building's concrete stairs, too agitated to wait for an elevator. And on the sizzling asphalt of the parking lot sits his Escalade. In the driver's seat, he is sweating, and near tears, and twitching, and he watches his own fingers reach for the glove compartment, where he pulls from it a thick manila envelope. It's warm, textured. He makes a strange gurgling sound, and places it back inside.

*

Something, from far away:

A kind of deep bass, rhythmic and undulating, deep inside Will's head. The core of a star, or the nucleus of an atom. Pulsating there to all outer extremities. It shocked Will in such total abandon that he fell to his knees in the back corner room, and the vase he has never liked shattered into a million glittering pieces and he fell amongst them.

He stares at the plastered ceiling, and the small bubbles there look to mimic him on the floor: his arms splayed out, his legs, his exposed throat, his heaving chest. He has been seeing himself everywhere lately. He is everywhere lately. The house has cracked open and spilled the world like egg yolk, dribbling down a fractured shell. Will in the sky, Will in the sea. Will in one pupil blown wide.

Will screams, piercing, even to his own ears: "Two more days! *Two more days!*"

*

The sky is afire. The lampposts begin to flicker and Frederick and Bedelia arrive at just the same time, into their twin drives. She exits her car a fraction of a second sooner, and it is as if Frederick does not exist to her. No, they are on opposite sides of a watery veil which stands at the ravine. And Frederick strolls up the sandcrete stones as she does, her heels clicking. The door opens for her, and Frederick sees it: the strong, sure forearm, the veined hand, only these things and nothing more. And he knows that this man has been on top of and inside Will. And he knows he has touched Will, and made him come, and he has heard Will's sweet voice as it is in the moments just after orgasm—tired, and giddy. Kissed his mouth, and touched his hair. Seen the deep arch Will can make in his back, that which Frederick will always consider the highest art form. And for just an instant, Frederick's mind goes blank and he stands at his own doorstep, keys in hand, eyes so swampy green they might be black. And the sun goes down. When the door opens for him, Will stands looking confused, and he is pale and pure.

"Ricky?"

Frederick's hoarse voice: "Hey, Will."

*

The night is perilous and Will navigates it with the utmost caution, though he does not understand the rules to this game. Is he permitted to touch his husband? Even a light, minute, loving caress of his skin?

Will looks at Frederick's outline: just visible in the blue line of light from between the curtains. He watches the ceiling as he has come to do, and the room smells of cardboard and no longer of their soft home's detergent. The boxes make darkened moors on the sides and corners of the room. Rolls of tape seated on full boxes cast shadows.

Will is sure of this: there exists some sentence, some formation of words, which would help him mend the rift that has cleaved their bed once more. Something he could say. Something that might persuade Frederick to come over to him. And were Will equipped enough, he might be able to say them. Or to keep talking until they haphazardly fell from his mouth. And in doing so, Frederick would turn from the ceiling to Will and embrace him and kiss him, and tell him he is loved.

He feels it now, something bubbling in his chest, and thinks perhaps it is the exact phrase he needs. He doesn't know what it is, or where it has come from, or what it will sound like once exposed, but he swallows and opens his mouth to release it. It can hardly do damage. And perhaps it will work. Perhaps it will—

But Frederick's eyes are closed, and his breathing is even. And he is asleep, and Will cannot follow him there.

*

"Hmm. All right. Which one?"

"Any one you want." Frederick is laughing, lightly. Cannot help it. "But make sure it's good."

"Pressure." Bedelia leans back into the leather and she is wearing a smile too, or something close to it. Brighter than the tight-lipped sketchings of amusement she normally gives. Yet it is, as ever, touched by unrest. She fidgets— Frederick has not seen her at this before. With the hem of her red dress, the thin stem of her wine glass. Frederick holds one as well. This is not so much a therapy session as a goodbye, and Frederick has told her what he holds in his glove compartment and he has asked for her forgiveness for his judgment the day prior. She has said she forgives him. But in this, as in all things, Frederick thinks one could change one's mind. He takes a deep drink from the glass of red wine and what is left glitters in the noonday sun.

Frederick watches as she stands from the leather chair, her glass in hand. He says, "I'd prefer something embarrassing. God knows he's embarrassed me fifty times over. I want to hear something of the like about him."

"Afraid you'll have to be disappointed," she says. Her back to him, the curves of her shoulder blades shadowed. "I don't have any of those."

"Not in ten years?"

"Not in ten years."

"That's a lie." Frederick crosses one ankle over his other knee. "You're holding onto loyalties."

"Aren't I supposed to?"

Frederick eyes his ring.

She turns around, the dress flowing at her knees. "All right. I've thought of something."

"Please, share with the class."

"Second anniversary. We went to Florence, Italy. Lovely place. I'd never been before, but he had." She takes a sip, long and slow. As she speaks, she keeps the rim of the glass pressed to her lower lip. "He said I just had to come with him. That I would love it, endlessly. He'd set the entire thing up. Very romantic. The Portrait Firenze. The trip was to last a week, and by the fifth day we'd spent so much time in the hotel that I was becoming restless. I wanted to see all of this ancient city, just like he promised me. Yet when I asked him to come sight-seeing with me, he said he wasn't feeling well. He stayed in the hotel, while I went out in the early morning. It was lovely." Her eyes grow wide, dark, and she looks at Frederick, and then through him, as if she sees the city behind his leather loveseat. "It was everything he'd described. I was gone hours, and only returned so soon for the low battery in my camera. Mm. So. I opened the door to our suite, and found my beloved husband in our bed with the chambermaid."

Frederick knocks back the rest of his wine. He sits the drained glass on the small end table beside the armrest, and leans forward with one elbow upon his knee. "Let me guess," he says. "You screamed, you threw your camera at them."

"I would have," she says, and drains her own. "But *she* began to scream first. All in Italian, I only caught a quarter of it. She was young, a tiny birdlike thing. She was crying and ran out of the room barely half-clothed. It took everything in me..." She shudders and smiles, in such a way that she has to lower her gaze for shame of terrible mirth. "It took everything in me not to laugh myself sick."

Frederick snorts— it sets off some sort of chain reaction. From him to her, their hand-in-front-of-mouth smiles morph into chuckling, then breathless laughter, and surely this is inappropriate; the crying clients out in the waiting room, those who suffer day in and day out and come crawling to Bedelia for comfort, for guidance. They surely must hear the two in the office. Frederick thinks this, only fleetingly, because he in truth does not care. He laughs until he is bent over double, Bedelia laughs until she has to stagger back to her seat, and they gasp for breath at last, both tired with joy.

*

The dark of their bedroom in the night. Will's eyes forever on his husband's outline, and the soft rise and fall of his chest. The room is full of boxes, no longer knolls and hills but rocky mountain ranges. This place is no longer home.

Has it ever been?

I've made it, Will thinks, and something in him heaves in its sleep, then resettles. He is smiling in the dark, and touches Frederick's warm arm.

"I'm sorry," they both say.

Will blinks, startled by the echo in his words. He finds Frederick turning to him, facing him now on his side, and Will says, "What?"

"I'm sorry," Frederick repeats, exhaling. He moves his hand along Will, and the anklet he uses as a bracelet drags against their skin. "I've barely spoken to you. I haven't been kind and—"

Will finds this insanely funny, and to keep himself from laughing, he digs his left big toenail into his right foot. The pain sobers him, and he says, "Ricky. Don't. Don't ever apologize about that, about anything."

"I can't control it," Frederick says. His voice is soft, wondering. "I think I will always be mad at you, Will."

"Ricky, it's all right—"

"Don't interrupt." His swallow audible. "Maybe— Maybe I *won't* always be mad. But I'll always feel something. And every now and again it will come out of me and I will snap at you, or be unkind, or make you unhappy, and I will be unable to live with myself. You're not my punching bag."

"I love you."

"Will."

Will smiles, though he knows Frederick cannot see it. He closes the distance between them in a mad rush and throws his arms around the man's neck, and buries his face into a warm, lightly haired chest. "I love you," he says, the words badly slurred. "Jesus, Ricky." He lowers one hand, down the man's stomach, to snake into his boxers, and ignores the grunt of surprise he receives. "*You're not my punching bag.* You're the only one who would ever say that to me." He grips Frederick and coaxes him quickly to life under the band of the shorts. Frederick's breath hitches, and Will is in tremors. His watery words: "No one else cares."

Frederick is quiet. He does not seem to refute Will, and soon begins to reciprocate, as he moves Will's own boxers down his slim hips. Will swallows, again and again. Steadies himself, paces himself. Does not move too fast— like stalking woodland animals. Tentative and soft footsteps. He feels his heart in the start of his throat and has trouble breathing over it. Pressing kisses under Frederick's chin, his collarbone, his chest. Will is soaking warm, pulsating heat, and he thinks of what he must look like to Frederick: a bright star settled in beside him, clawing at him, demon-eyed and mewling.

Will lies on his back. Frederick sighs as he slides in, and Will settles his legs around the man's waist.

For just a second, Will's eyes shut. His head craned back in the curve of the pillow, throat open, body open. Fingertips shaking along Frederick's shoulders, biceps. And Will remembers glass shattering this week, and the cuts on his hands, and laying sweaty on the hard floor. Frederick moves in him and each tightening in Will's gut throbs elation and security and he grips and cries out, kisses, and knows tonight he will be dreamless.

*

"H-Hey. Am I. R-Ricky, ah. Am I— am I still red?"

"God, Will. Will."

"Ricky..."

"You're not— fuck, you're not red."

"Wh— mm— what am I?"

"You're just beautiful. Will."

*

Something. Something rouses him. Will touches wakefulness, just caresses it, then leaves it be for a moment longer. Flinches, and feels it again, and this time wanders into its open arms. His eyes open on the ceiling. Swallows thickly. He smells of sex and Frederick and he shifts, moving his hand into the coolness of the sheet beside him. He expected warmth, and his husband's skin, and shifts further. Turns, to find himself alone in bed.

Will struggles to sit up, and tents his eyebrows. He looks around, curls touching his cheeks. The room is silent, save the soft whir of the air conditioner. The boxes where they were left, and Frederick's empty space in the bed barely visible in the darkened lighting. The nightstand clock has been packed away, but it is not yet morning. Some medium hour of yawning darkness, something purple outside and misted with stars. Will clears his throat, cranes his neck. The bathroom is empty.

"Ricky?" he says. His voice hoarse.

He listens, tries to hear for downstairs. Nothing. He sighs and takes his feet to the cool flooring, and pulls on his boxers that were rustled between sheets.

"Ricky?"

He stands in the darkened upper hallway, his hand on the wall. The texture strange beneath his fingers. The flattened palm of his hand. And the shadows on the stairs, almost moving, almost dreamlike. Though he knows he isn't dreaming. He moves downstairs a step at a time, touching along the walls, the corners. The first floor is now chasmy with the lack of appliances, the bare counters, the high ceilings. That first day when Will walked these floors cutting open boxes.

Will the Merciful, Will the Merciful.

Will walks to the granite island in the middle of the kitchen. Where he and Frederick have eaten burnt toast slathered with jam. A manila folder sits alone, Will's name marked on it. Will squints in the half-light, shadows, moving through the wide windows. He peels it open, and the tangle of beads he made comes tumbling out, along with a sheaf of papers. Will hears thrumming in his ears, drums being pounded, and he sees Frederick's signature along these papers, and an empty line for his own besides.

"Nn." Will makes this sound, and his eyes nearly roll back in his head for just an instant. His legs lacking bones but he moves them, gripping a few sheets of the papers in hand. Towards the window. "Nn." He leans on the sink, and nausea overtakes him, and he doubles over into the basin, releasing a thin bile into the drain. He heaves, makes the sound again: "Nn." Then: "No."

He exhales, drags in a breath, and braces himself along the sink's edge. When he looks out onto their front lawn, lit by lampposts and nighttime sky, he sees his Mercedes alone.

"No. No, no," he mutters, and moves as if through water: through the kitchen, the foyer, and struggling with the door. His vision blurring terribly, and he bursts out of the house as he once burst into the world, thirty years ago, and he cries now as he cried then: with such total abandon, for he has not known trauma like this. Being known to oneself and being born alone.

He is screaming Frederick's name, piercing all the night. Taking addled steps to the driveway, over grass wet with night dew, and falling to his knees on the pavement, the burning of them skidding into the ground. The papers falling in front of him.

Somewhere, in the back and corner of his mind, he is aware that he will wake everyone up, that his cries of fervor and terror will call all from their homes, and it does, it does just that, and doors along Sol Terrace open, and curtains part and if Will were to look to his right, he would see the houses open to the night, faces lit slowly by porch lights.

But he looks to the empty spot before him where once an Escalade sat and he continues to scream as if this would bring it back; calling it, demanding of it. He hears another door open, and this so close that he cannot help but look to his left, his eyes wide and shivering in pale moonlight. At the house to the left, just beyond the sandcrete doorstep, is Hannibal in sleek dark pajama pants and a thin shirt. His hair blowing softly in perfumed wind. And he holds in his hand a sheaf of papers, not so unlike those littered from Will's kitchen to his driveway and all around him like a spring bed of white roses.

Then, so suddenly. Hannibal turns from the empty spot in his own driveway where once an Audi sat. And he looks across the grassy ravine to find Will kneeling and sodden-faced. The look he wears is foreign and strange: waters from another land washing against new shores. For an instant, he does not look to know where he is, or indeed who he is. And when his gaze falls upon Will, his eyes focus, as if this is one thing he recognizes.

Will feels horror in the pit of his stomach. And it releases in wet warmth across his lap, the fear in him so wide-spread that he cannot help it. He feels it dripping down his thighs and pooling around him, the scents of urine and sweat mixing, and he jerks his head again for the road and the stop sign at the end of the lane. Crying, calling, "You can't! You can't leave me with *him* please Ricky don't do this don't leave me with *him* please—" and devolving into choked babble and he cannot stop himself, not for his neighbors watching with silent stares nor for the stars looking down with only a passing interest.

*

Just barely morning. The sun is half-awake, and the sky is stirred with gold and rose. Frederick squints, pulling at the visor. He has been driving and every red light has been an obstacle, nigh insurmountable in its challenge, for at each he has thought to go back. Every second that passes, he thinks, *Will must be awake now*.

And every second that passes, something in him says, *Go back. You've taught him a lesson he will not ever forget. Go back, and rescue him from himself*.

Frederick could run himself off of the road with how he jerks the wheel at this. The impulse is as breathing. Necessity, and habit. Though he manages to make it to Baltimore Beach, pulling off the main road to park in gravel adjacent to vast and empty volleyball courts. The Escalade slides under yawning morning light to sidle beside a silver Audi. Frederick unbuckles himself, pauses here, exhales, and exits the car to be met with Bedelia walking towards him, her eyes both watery and hard in the oncoming day. The wind tosses her yellow skirt, and there are goosebumps lining her arms, though it is beginning now to warm into familiar July heat.

They stand before each other, and Frederick realizes he has never seen her this way before. Not in the wide open, beyond her office or Sol Terrace, nor the unknown look she

wears, as if she has sailed to a strange land. Her ship in ruins behind her. Thoughts and dreams of home all she bears.

"I did it," she says. Her voice is high, breathless. "I."

Frederick finds himself nodding. "Me too."

"I."

"It's all right."

The hardness in her eyes diminishes. And now there is only water. And Frederick holds his hands up, tremoring, to calm her.

"Frederick."

"Don't cry," he says. "If you cry, you'll go back." He thinks: *If you cry, I'll go back.*

She exhales all at once, and through wet eyes, she says, "I'm not crying."

The tone in her voice – slight indignation – reminds Frederick of Will and his bones jelly. He has hooks still in his flesh. And Will pulls from afar. He yanks back. Straightens, and says, "I won't be able to help you, if you have regrets. I won't be able to talk you out of going back."

Her hair twirls in ringlets across her shoulders. She shakes her head. "I suppose I'll have to get a new therapist."

Frederick nods. "Me too."

She moves back first. Her stance, her gait, these things positioned in such a way that Frederick cannot parse. He cannot tell if she is going back, or going forward. And just now, he cannot find it in him to wonder much over it, or rightly care. He has all of him tied up in holding himself, pulling himself back step by step to the Escalade. He opens the door, slides into the leather seat, and rolls down the tinted window. Bedelia, framed in her own open window, hangs her long white arm over the top, and tosses a gold ring into the gravel. She swallows, looks lightly bewildered and peels off, leaving marks against the ground and screeching sound in her wake. Frederick looks down at the ring and, tenderly, drops his own on top of it.

He drives away too. And the road is long, and the morning comes at him ceaselessly, rising until it is day. Heated and open. Frederick continues to drive into it, tapping his fingers along the steering wheel and switching the radio on and off. And never does that voice stop, that which tells him to *go back, go back.*

Pick him off the floor.

Glue him together again.

Kiss the hairline fractures.

It takes all of Frederick, every ounce, to resist. So much strength and power that there is no weak sliver left to cry.

*

Seven years ago.

From the coffee shop to the car; from the car to the high-rise building's lobby; from the lobby to the ease and bright lighting of Frederick's apartment. Will had complained in something resembling a long string of moans: the customers that day, the argument he'd had with a roommate the night before, and the penalty of equipment washing for losing yet another apron. Will had had it built up in him all day, counting down the minutes until Frederick would come in his car and take him away from the Common, take him back to his solitude and quietude, listen to Will without interrupting.

Until, yes, *the* interruption, which Will himself initiated. Barely in through the front door and laughing, shucking Frederick of his grey pinstriped suit jacket, his hundred-dollar tie. Will loved using them as blindfolds but held himself far too beautiful this evening for anyone to be denied sight of him. He kept Frederick accountable for all of his senses.

At some point, though Will was unsure when, they slinked in cat-tussling fashion from the floors to the cumulus bed. The covers in mass disarray, and the duvet tossed to the floor. Just a ghost-white sheet tangled around their legs. Their sweat mingling and drenching the fitted sheet beneath.

Will's hair limp, half in his eyes. Stomach-down, he panted faint and low and grinned into Frederick's exhausted expression. He said, "Hey, don't look so worn out. I've still got at least two more in me."

Frederick raised an eyebrow, gave Will that mock-chastising look. "Refractory period, Will. Have you heard of that?"

"Nope. What is it?"

Frederick sighed.

Will snorted, pulling him in. Began gnawing on his ear, mumbling, "Don't use therapist talk on me."

"I-It's not— ow! It's not therapist talk," he said, and settled a bit as Will's gnaws matured to light sucks and kisses. Frederick sighed into it. "God. I could do this for the rest of my life, you know."

Will paused, minutely. Then took himself away entirely, and looked into Frederick's dark green eyes. "Uh huh," he said, ruminating. "So. Is this— you proposing?"

He watched and tried not to laugh: the expressions crossing Frederick's face terribly hilarious. Things Will could only describe as shock, consideration, iffiness, then some sort of resolution. His voice as unsure, as hopeful, as it was that night a year ago, when he wandered

up to the counter and asked if Will was free sometime that week. He said: "Yes. Yes, it is."
Tone dipping lower: "Will you marry me?"

Will looked at him. Then flopped onto his back, arms folded against his chest. "This is unbelievable! Where's my ring? How completely unromantic. I'm surprised at you, Ricky."

"I-I-I, wait, I just— I mean, I've— That's not—"

Will could not keep it up for more than a second. The floundering going on beside him too much. He collapsed into raucous laughter, feet kicking up in the sheet, arms encircling Frederick's neck. Frederick scarlet and still muttering about there being a ring, of course there was a ring, somewhere, but Will's cries overtook anything else Frederick had to say.

Will continued, rubbing his face into Frederick's cheek, shouting, "Yes, you fucking dork! Yes, yes, yes!"

Chapter End Notes

Look at that glorious story! Look at it! Now respect it!

Ah, so, let me sing the praises of my commenters. We've had some stellar discussions and their analysis game is so on point. I feel, better than appreciated, I feel like they get what this story is really about and what I did. Nothing better than that. You are awesome.

Someone commissioned a sequel oneshot to this from me. Found through [here](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!